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MOTHER WENT MAD ON MONDAY

*By ETHEL HUESTON*

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*Mother Went Mad on Monday* --



# Mother went Mad on Monday

*by*  
**ETHEL HUESTON**



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**MOTHER WENT MAD ON MONDAY**



# I

IT HAPPENED on Monday. It must have come on very suddenly. She was quite all right on Sunday. At least, she seemed all right. Doris, that's my sister, says you never can tell about those things. Sometimes they creep up on you gradually like spring thaws and you never suspect a thing until the dam breaks, and sometimes they tear loose all of a sudden like a Russian offensive and there you are.

Mother's may have crept up like a spring thaw but when the dam broke it was a Russian offensive.

Father mentioned it first. "Girls," he said, in the hoarse, shocked voice he usually reserved for the war and the administration and taxes, "girls, your mother has gone mad."

I would swear she was all right on Sunday. Everything went off just as it did every Sunday.

I sleep lightly and waken quickly. I heard her get up and go downstairs but I kept my eyes shut pretending to be asleep so I wouldn't be asked to get up and begin doing things. I heard her open the front door and let Skivar out and bring in the morning paper. I heard her open the back door and bring in the milk bottles and put them in the refrigerator. I must have dozed off again for the next thing I heard she was coming back upstairs. She went to Dorry's room first. Dorry was older than I and got all the best breaks so it was only fair she should be called first.

"Doris," she said, "if you are going to Sunday school you must get up now. Breakfast's ready. . . . Doris!"

Doris moaned like a movie actress in pain or love.

"Doris!" Mother said sharply.

Doris had heard every word. Mother knew it as well as I did. "I'm not going to Sunday school," she said faintly. "I'm no infant. I'm too tired to get up. I don't want any breakfast. Leave me alone."

Mother came on to my door. "Cherry, if you're going to Sunday school you must get up now. Breakfast is ready."

I moaned too. I was wide awake and I intended to go to Sunday

school because my friend Junie Lake and I had arranged to meet a couple of the boys afterward and go for a hike. But I wasn't going to let Dorry and her war-job airs get ahead of me, so I moaned like the dickens.

"You heard me, Cherry," Mother said.

"I'm all worn out and I certainly need a little Sabbath rest but okay, okay, I'll be down," I said. "Keep it hot a minute."

The rule was that Father was never to be called on Sunday morning because we wanted him to sleep off the war and taxes as long as possible. Of course, he couldn't sleep on Sundays and always got to the bathroom first. Since he got to the bathroom first as usual, he was downstairs first as usual and was sitting at the table, groaning with the paper in front of him.

I never could understand why he was always in such a mad rush to look at the paper when all he did was groan when he got it. But you get used to things even if you don't understand them. He was groaning and eating his breakfast and I thought of groaning, too, for he and Dorry were always getting ahead of Mother and me, one way and another, and I figured if I moaned after Dorry why shouldn't I groan after Father? Except that Mother would think I was sick and might plunk me off to bed with an Ex-Lax when I really had to keep that date after Sunday school. So I didn't groan but I looked as mournful as possible.

We ate along and nothing was heard but the munching of toast and the taxpayer's groans until Mother said, "Are you going to church this morning, Dad?"

I went ahead with my breakfast because she asked the same question every Sunday and I knew the answer by heart. If I had had the paper, I could have done it as well as he did.

He slapped it down on the table and choked over a bit of dry toast and said in a strangled voice, "Church! Church! Am I going to church? Don't you know this is September and I've got to file that damned hypothetical estimated earnings report next week?"

It wasn't always estimated earnings. Sometimes it was plain income tax, or subsidies, or employees' benefits or withholdings, but every Sunday morning there was something to be damned and keep him away from church.

"Don't upset your coffee," Mother said quietly. "I've heard they are going to tax broken coffee cups next."

I knew she was kidding but when Father has the morning paper before him he can't see a joke. The headlines fog up his glasses. "It wouldn't surprise me a bit," he said, in his hoarse tax voice. "They'll be penalizing us for bread crumbs before long. A bread crumb dropped is a bomber lost. But if you are going to church," he went on more briskly, raising his voice from its deep war depths, "you'd better not take the car. I'm not sure how the coupons are holding out. It's not far—the fresh air will do you good."

"I didn't intend to take the car," Mother said. "I enjoy walking to church because it takes longer and the longer I am out of this war-and-tax ridden house the better I like it. But I could take the car if I wanted to! Even when the pleasure ban was on, driving to church was permitted."

"God knows it was no pleasure," Father said, and added with tardy politeness, "except to those who enjoy it."

"I enjoy it," Mother said. "It's an escape. You really should try it, Dad. It's almost the only place you can go these days and get away from apoplectic husbands unable to swallow the administration, and from silly, over-lipsticked young brats putting on airs about their war jobs, and from—" She looked at me, hard, but she didn't go into details in my direction. "It's an escape. I can't think of anything I enjoy more right now than escaping."

All as normal as could be.

There wasn't time for me to do the dishes so I got ready and shot off to Sunday school. After Sunday school Junie and I ducked out the side door to make sure of not meeting relations on their way in. The boys were waiting and we went off to a really ducky place we had found down the railroad tracks a little way from town—Mill Run it was called. In the old days, when the boys could use the family cars, we had never considered the possibilities of this accessible spot but it turned out to be a little bit of really all right, with trees around and far enough from the road so that passing parents could not recognize you by your clothes.

The small fry had discovered it, too, and were always around getting into things and begging your refreshments and pitching balls that

never seemed to be aimed at anything but kept you dodging. I got so used to dodging that I could miss a fly by three inches with a pop bottle in one hand and a cookie in the other without interrupting a sentence.

On that Sunday we had cokes and peanuts and never once thought of the time until it was two-thirty and we lit out for home as if we had been fired out of rockets.

At our house dinner was over. Doris was off out of sight upstairs. Father was groaning over some senator's speech he hadn't had time to read before and Mother was at the desk writing to Larry, just as she did every Sunday afternoon.

"You, at last," she said, when I dashed in. "I hope everything is cold and not fit to eat and I hope you have acute indigestion for two days. But what there is left of dinner you will find out there someplace."

I went to the kitchen and found plenty, cold, of course, but I wasn't picky. When I was through I went back and got my homework and sat down close to the desk where she couldn't help noticing how conscientious I was, because I wanted to go out that evening.

I studied and Father groaned and Mother went on writing to Larry.

Larry is our brother. He was in northern Ireland with the Army. He was a First Lieutenant in the Infantry. He was very glad he had taken ROTC in college—getting extra spending money out of the Government for it, too. He thanked his lucky stars over that, because he hadn't been out of college a year when he was ordered into service. Larry said they just waited long enough for the ink on his diploma to dry.

Mother sent him a little scratch of something every day, a card, a clipping, a snapshot, to make sure he had his share whenever mails got in. On Sunday afternoon, she really went to town for him. She spent hours over it. She told him everything that had happened within miles of us during the entire week and specialized on little unpleasant inadvertences that transpired in our immediate household.

Every day she made cryptic notes on the kitchen blackboard, usually in reference to minor embarrassments that happened to one or the other of us, and usually me. I erased her memoranda a time or two but it didn't work. I don't know why she bothered to keep

notes. Compared to Mother, an elephant is downright absent-minded.

Mother had gone all out for the Army, if you know what I mean. Not just for Larry; we were all that way over him. We always had been. But Mother had taken over the entire expeditionary force. An unfortunate circumstance that was nobody's fault had set her off.

She had written Larry a letter full of things much better left unsaid, and when Larry wrote back he said it had gone the rounds of his entire outfit. Some had made copies of it. The most unflattering excerpts had been quoted in what he called their "private news rag." They were all asking how soon he would get another letter. One had said, "That Cherry of yours—the one you call the Squirt—is a dead ringer for my kid sister that we call Worm." Several had asked for snapshots of Doris, who is very beautiful. And several said, "That's my family all over."

After that, Mother really went to town on her Sunday letters. She wasn't just writing to Larry. She was writing to the United States Army, as much of it as Larry had around him in North Ireland. I blush yet to think that virtually every Irishman in that part of the Emerald Isle knows about the time I was bringing clothes from the line. Our maid, like Doris, had set out to win the war and a good salary on her own hook and we had to do our own laundry. I was bringing it in and Skivar, Larry's dog, got hold of Dorry's best silk step-ins. I had to chase him three blocks, right to the center of town, and we had a terrific tug-of-war over them.

Half the town, as I recall, gathered round us and made bets on the outcome and whether the step-ins belonged to Skivar or me, and which was the renegade thief and which the justly outraged proprietor.

When I finally got them away from him, only slightly damaged, I said haughtily, "They don't belong to either of us! They're Dorry's. Only a war jobber could afford such expensive ones!"

When Dorry, the ingrate, after all I had gone through saving them for her, heard about it, she was furious and made me pay back the dollar I owed her.

That's the sort of thing Irishmen and Larry's outfit were hearing about me.

Mother meant well. She would call up all his old crowd who were still around town and get bits of news and gossip from them and then exaggerate everything to make a good story for Larry, so all his outfit, who should have had something better to do with their time on the taxpayers' money, could roll in their bunks and laugh at us and at Morrisville, a nice enough town, though at the time I preferred New York and Hollywood.

So I did my homework and kept an ear on Father and an eye on Mother and tried to think back over the last week, hoping she had forgotten the night I had an important date with a newly inducted marine in uniform who took me to a movie. And Skivar, the filthy beast, sneaked in after us. I dragged him out three times, but every time he managed to work his way in and nosed around among the feet until he found mine and then, in spite of my shoving, tried to sit in my lap, though he is so big it would take a moving van to hold him. Finally the usher asked us to leave.

You can see that everything was as normal as could be on Sunday.

Mother turned on the radio and Father's groan rose to a hoarse shriek. He said why the devil weren't we satisfied with the bad news in the paper without having it thrown in our teeth every fifteen minutes by radio? Mother got a soothing symphony and he settled down again.

It was getting along toward suppertime when Doris came down, a slick chick, in a brand-new outfit that must have cost her a pretty penny out of her war-work salary. She remarked languidly that she wouldn't be home for supper; she was going out.

Those war jobbers made me sick. The year before, just three months before, Doris had been another high school girl, like me. Now she was on war work with a salary and smart new clothes and a Myrna Loy languor, acting as if the war was her personal property.

I asked her once how many bolts a minute she could turn out, per-  
vaded as she was with that delicate, luxurious lassitude. She said, "I'm resting now, Cherry. I'm just resting. When I'm on the job, I'm on the job!"

Her eyes snapped as she said it and her shoulders went back and her chin up so I knew for sure what I had suspected all along, that her dainty exhaustion was part of her new make-up.

Dorry was all right, perfectly all right. She was the top sister in town before she began winning the war. Like Father, before he began paying for it. Not at all bad, both of them, as fathers and sisters go. Quite the contrary. But once they got into the thing, they drew it exclusively to them and made it their own. Father groaned and Dorry languored until if it hadn't been that Larry was in it, I'd have said, "The heck with their silly old war!"

But Larry was in it.

We took his going very well. At least we thought we did. We told each other so and he said so too. We didn't know where he was going. We just knew he was going somewhere to war. We found out later, much later. But we took it well. We felt sad and worried but we kept our chins up and when we went to the station with him at the end of his last leave, we all stood there, Mother, too, smiling and waving.

On our way home, though, none of us said anything. And when we got into the house, we skooted quickly off to our separate rooms and you could hear doors closing in every direction. But we took it all right, better than one would have expected, because he was our only boy and we were all nuts about him.

I thought it was going to be pretty tough on me when he left. It is not at all bad at sixteen to be the sister of a big, nice, good-looking thing like our Larry. Grown-up girls, older than Doris, girls who had been away to college and traveled in Europe made a great fuss over me and bought me sodas and chocolate bars and gave me cute little presents. I thought the racket would stop cold when Larry left but it didn't. They wanted to hear the latest news from him so I got along better than I expected.

It was quite a while after he went that the family began going to pot, as you might say. It came on so gradually at first I thought it was just indigestion with Father and feeling her oats with Doris. But they didn't get over it. It grew worse. We seemed to be in for the duration.

When school closed in the spring, Doris, with most of the older upperclassmen, went over to Du Pont and got herself a war job. That was all right on the face of it. It seemed all right. But pretty soon there was virtually no living with her. She had adopted the

war and at a salary that made my high school allowance look like sawdust.

It wasn't until just before school was to open again in the fall that things really came to a head. All through summer we had thought of course when school opened she would give up the job and go back and finish up. It was to be her last year in high school. But Doris balked. She said she wasn't going back. She tried to pretend at first that it was her patriotic duty to keep on doing her bit for the war but she didn't fool us. We knew she liked the job. She liked having her own money. She liked buying her own clothes and spending more for them than our budget allowed. She preferred war work to school.

We ate, slept, breathed War Work vs. Education for three weeks before school opened. Doris won out. She would be eighteen in October and she said if they forced her back to school, she would stop the day she became of age and go back to Du Pont. You'd have thought she was married to the thing.

Father and Mother knew they were licked. They gave up. But the family was no good after that. School opened. I went back and Doris didn't. And now we were near the end of that September when school opened without Doris, on that Sunday afternoon with Dad groaning, me doing homework and Mother listening to the symphony with Larry in her eyes, when Doris tripped in looking like a million dollars and said she was going out for supper.

Mother turned off the radio. "Where are you going?" she asked, eying the sleek little outfit with coldly appraising eyes.

"Over to Mrs. Delafield's. She asked a few of us in for supper tonight."

Mother's eyebrows went up. She looked at Dad. "I can't understand why Gorge Delafield has gone in for playing around with schoolchildren," she said.

Dorry's brows went up. "War workers. I think you can hardly call us children, Mother."

"No, I can't. You don't know enough. I should have said babies. Gorge Delafield is forty-five if she's a day."

"Mother, I don't see how you can be so-intolerant," Doris said. The tone of her voice made "intolerant" sound like "catty." "She doesn't look a day over twenty-five."

"I'm not talking about her looks. I'm talking about her age," Mother said tartly. "She was a year ahead of me in high school and she had missed a year because of sickness. I'm forty-five. Figure it out for yourself. You'd think she would try to pick up friendships in her own bracket, or at least in the same generation."

"Her spirit is so youthful she naturally enjoys youth," Doris said with her most maddeningly cinematical air. "Are you sure it's the same girl, Mother?"

"No! I know it isn't the same girl. She was a girl thirty years ago. It's the same woman. I'm sure of that."

"Well, nightie-night," said Doris. "Be seeing you at breakfast. I may be quite late, so don't wait up for me. I made up this morning for the sleep I'm going to lose tonight."

We said good night, Father mournfully, Mother disgustedly, I enviously, thinking of the nice clothes and the good time.

That wasn't our first argument about Mrs. Delafield. She ran taxes and war and education a hard race for position in our conversation and I must say she held her own. I'll give her credit for that. She was a widow, apparently with plenty of money, who had come back to Morrisville recently. She had taken a lovely old house and put nice things in it and had people working on the grounds whenever she could get them, mostly invalids too weak for war jobs and characters too unsavory for the service.

We were excited about her moving in, our crowd I mean. We hoped that she would have some sons or daughters we could get acquainted with. But there was none in evidence.

And then one night at dinner Mother said, "Dad, you know this Mrs. Delafield who has just moved to town? Do you know who she is? She's Gorge Bemis—you remember Gorge Bemis!—Evelyn, I think her name was until we began calling her Gorge. Well, it's Gorge Bemis! I knew she had married somebody but I didn't recall the Delafield. Well, it's Gorge Bemis—now Delafield."

"Is that so?" Father asked in the vague way he had of discussing social matters. "How did you find that out?"

"I saw her. I was in the garden and she came along and we looked at each other and we both frowned and then we looked puzzled and she said, 'Could you be Helen Cherry?' and I said, 'Aren't you Gorge Bemis?' And we both were!"

"Imagine that," Father said.

"I think you must be mistaken, Mother," Doris said. "Mrs. Delafield is a friend of Emalie's. It must be somebody else you're thinking of—maybe her mother."

"Who is a friend of Emalie's?" Mother asked.

"This Mrs. Delafield who has just moved to town. She asked Emalie to pick out the nicest of all the young crowd and invite them to supper at her house Sunday evening. Emalie invited me this morning."

Emalie was the daughter of the best banker in town and traveled around in Dorry's crowd.

You could have knocked this family over with a feather—that is, you could have knocked Father and Mother and me over. It would have taken a Flying Fortress to down Doris.

"Do you mean she is having a party Sunday night?" Mother asked at last.

"I presume so. I am invited."

"Well," Mother said, "I was going to have a few of our old crowd in to renew acquaintance with her, but if she's gone back to high school I think I won't."

Mrs. Delafield seemed extremely fond of young people, young people as old as Doris but not so young as I. She gave lovely parties for the older young set and kept her house full of them. They were crazy about her. Mother didn't so much as pay her a polite call.

I liked her, too. That is, I liked her looks. She smiled at me on the street but I didn't know her. I was in the younger young set.

She wore stunning clothes and had lovely reddish hair and long, bright-polished fingernails. She was always gay and smiling, at me, at everybody.

Mother stuck to it that she was the same girl who had been in high school with her and had later gone away and "married somebody." And Mother always called her "Gorge" which made Doris furious because it sounded so disrespectful. All the older young set were very respectful to her.

Mother said that once in school they had overheard one of her youthful admirers call her "Gorgeous" and they had immediately taken it up and called her "Gorge" until the day of her graduation from high school and her moving away from Morrisville.

Mother said it was perfectly ridiculous for a woman her age to choose friends just stepping out of their swaddling clothes, though I don't think they've used those since the Bible, and all Dorry's arguments about the grown-upishness of war workers didn't make her change her mind.

Doris said they had wonderful times at Mrs. Delafield's and she was just like one of them and not at all like an old woman. She was sure Mother had got her mixed up with somebody else, maybe some elderly relative. I asked her once why she didn't come right out and ask her if she had been in high school with Mother but Doris said she wouldn't insult her with such a question.

After Doris had gone, Mother and Dad and I had supper and I washed up the dishes without being told. Then I said I had already done my homework and if they didn't mind I would run over to Junie's for a while.

Mother gave me a hard look. "You were out last night, and tomorrow is a school day, Cherry. You may go, but you be back in this house by ten o'clock."

I went to Junie's and the boys were there and we fooled around and I give you my word it was one o'clock before anybody thought of the time. It was one-thirty when I got home. There was a light in the hall for me but as everybody was upstairs and the house was quiet, I took off my shoes and went up quietly and sneaked into bed.

So that Sunday I could swear Mother was perfectly all right. It went off just like every Sunday.

## II

LATER WE tried to think back and recall if there had been any noticeable change in her at breakfast on Monday but we couldn't put our fingers on anything. She went down first, let Skivar out and brought in the paper from the front porch and the milk from the back porch and after a while came to the foot of the stairs and called Dad and Doris, because they had to leave earliest and rated first turns at the bath.

Dad got up right away and began muttering. He didn't really get around to groaning until he saw the headlines. Mother called Doris three or four times and finally said, "Doris, this is your last chance to catch Mr. Du Pont's bus!" Then Doris bounded out of bed and by that time Dad was through with the bathroom.

It was just like every morning. We checked back over every detail but it was like every weekday morning: Dad at the table with his paper, Doris eating with one hand and fussing with her hair or smoothing her eyebrows with the other, I minding my own breakfast and saying absolutely nothing, not to start anything.

They went off to their jobs and I to high school, congratulating myself that I had got out of that one-thirty business pretty well. I had luncheon at school so it was nearly five when I reached home, because I met one of Larry's friends on the street and she invited me into a tea room for some ice cream.

Mother wasn't there when I got home but I thought nothing of that. Lots of times she wasn't there when I got home. I got some apples and peanuts and took them to the sun porch off the living room and buckled right down to my homework. That, I admit, was unusual, but there was a corking picture in town that night and one of the boys had said he'd stop around for me at seven-thirty. Besides, I wasn't sure but what Mother was holding that one-thirty o'clock matter up her sleeve for some strategic moment to spring it on me.

I plugged along with my homework and the apples and nuts and finally Doris came in. She went straight upstairs and began running the bath water without calling "Hello, Mother," as usual. She was still sore about the insulting remarks of the night before.

I plugged along with my homework until Dad came.

"Hello, Cherry. Hard at it, I see. That's the spirit. Where's Mother?"

"I don't know. She didn't leave a note."

"Where's Doris?"

"Upstairs."

There was a lot of mail for Dad, all of it bad, so he sat down and began making guttural sounds down deep in his throat, working himself up to a climax, but every once in a while he looked at the clock.

I got to looking at it too. We had dinner at six-thirty and if we were late I wouldn't be ready to leave by seven-thirty. Quarter to six, six, quarter past. Doris came downstairs.

"I don't hear anything going on," she said. "Isn't dinner nearly ready? Where's Mother?"

"God knows," Father said grimly.

"Well, what about dinner? Did she leave anything? I'm hungry." Doris was languidly plaintive.

"Well, what about it? Why ask me? Am I the cook?" Dad demanded.

"Well, dear me!" Doris said. "I don't see how she can expect me to do war work all day and then come home and do the housework."

"Oh, no! Certainly not," Father said sarcastically. "All she expects of you is to work all day and gad all night."

"Cherry, did Mother leave any instructions about dinner? Did she prepare anything?"

"I didn't look. I just got busy with my homework as I'm supposed to," I said virtuously.

Doris went to the kitchen. I could hear her opening cupboards, gas oven and icebox.

"Why, there isn't a thing!" she protested indignantly. "She hasn't so much as peeled the potatoes."

"I shouldn't think peeling a few potatoes would be any more exhausting after a day's work than jitterbugging six or seven hours." Father was still sarcastic.

"Cherry, you come out here and help me," Doris called. "Go down cellar and get some canned things. I can't imagine what Mother is thinking of! She knows how tired I get."

"Sure," Father called out from the living room, "we know you get tired but never tired enough to go to bed and get a good night's rest!"

"Maybe something happened," I suggested.

"Nothing happened at all!" Doris said viciously. "If anything had happened she would have phoned Dad or left a note."

It was too late to cook potatoes but we opened two or three cans. I set the table and Doris made coffee. Seven o'clock and still no Mother.

"We may as well eat and be done with it," Doris said. "I may want to go out a while."

We sat down to dinner. It seemed strange and the food was not very good, but there was one nice thing about that dinner. Doris forgot her war-work airs and Father was so surprised the taxes didn't get a groan out of him. We had cookies and canned peaches for dessert. By that time we were all watching the clock.

At seven-thirty, Artie came by for me and I told him I couldn't go, so he went on without me, in something of a huff.

It was a quarter to eight when Mother opened the door. "Thanks a lot, see you later!" she called to someone outside. She came in humming. She put some things down in the hall, humming all the time, moving slowly. We sat there and glared at the doorway, ripe and ready for her. She didn't hurry but finally she reached the door.

"Oh, hello! How nice and domestic you look!" she said lightly.

She was carrying her hat in her hand. She had on a stunning new fall suit that looked as smart as something right out of the pages of a fashion magazine. She stepped into the light of the room. I just looked. Father gaped.

"Mother!" Doris cried.

"Umm-hm! How do you like it? Rather something, don't you think? I decided if school children are such fun I would go in for it myself. I feel like a new woman already."

She revolved slowly, slim hands touching her hair primpingly.

She had had her hair done. It was more than done, it was overdone. Cut very short, a new permanent and dyed! Actually dyed! A shining rusty gold! She'd had a facial, too. And if it wasn't a professional who had handled her make-up, I'm not so good a judge as I think I am.

"I'm thinking of having my face lifted, Dad," she went on. "It's a very simple operation and it does wonders for us older girls. It only costs a few hundred dollars and worth every cent of it. Look! This is what it does." She put her hands to her cheekbones and lifted her face. "See? It eliminates that disfiguring sag. Why, it's worth a thousand dollars! It's the one thing no aging schoolgirl can afford to be without!"

"You're crazy!" He didn't exactly speak those words—he exploded them.

"Dad, don't be old-fashioned!" She laughed gaily. "I'm patriotic, that's all, I'm aflame with patriotism. Don't you want me to do my bit to uphold military and defense morale? I've seen the light, lots of light! It certainly makes a difference in my appearance—you must admit that."

"Don't you want some supper?" Father said abruptly.

"No, thanks, no supper. I want to watch my figure and besides we had a high tea, very high. I'm going out this evening. They'll be along for me almost any minute. I must run upstairs and change and touch up my make-up."

She went upstairs humming. We sat there. Father took a long gulp of cold coffee but Doris and I kept on staring at the door.

She was down again in a very few minutes. She was wearing a slick new fuchsia-colored dress, very gay. She had a fuchsia feather on her head. She said it was a silly little bonnet she had picked up at a great bargain but it was nothing but a draped feather. She asked if we didn't think it did things for her? We didn't say anything.

"And by the way," she said, "before I go I want to call attention to the regulations."

She paused so long that somebody had to say something. Doris and I couldn't. Finally Dad repeated feebly, "The regulations?"

"Yes. The Army runs by them. No war plant can operate without them. That's why we've had so much trouble around here lately—we haven't been regulated. We're going all out for regimentation from now on. . . . Let me see, Dad, we'll begin with you. I'm sick of your groaning and grousing and grumbling. You've got to cut it out around here. I won't have any more of it. Kindly do it at your office from this time on. If it's so bad you have to keep it up all night, I'll send down a blanket and you can sleep on the couch there. You can take your meals where you find them. There's nothing so demoralizing to morale as association with a grouser and grumbler. In this regimented home, it is out for the duration."

Father sputtered over his cold coffee but he didn't say anything.

"And you, Doris," Mother went on briskly, "since you are now merely a piece of war machinery and no longer a daughter in our home, you'll have to pay room and board and laundry bills like any other self-respecting economic unit. If you don't like it here, you can move out. I'm all through coddling you. A top soak would have

laid you out months ago. Hereafter I call you once in the morning, just once. I will have your meals ready for you at regular hours. I will charge standard union prices for everything I do for you. I will have the price list ready for you tomorrow. I have been inquiring around and know just what you'd have to pay for comparable service elsewhere. If you prefer to go elsewhere you are at perfect liberty to do so. I'll help you pack."

Doris gasped and swallowed hard at the same time and nearly choked.

I could feel myself turning pale. My knees were shaking.

"And you, Cherry. If you think I'm going to continue to be made a fool of by a silly little Apache taking advantage of upset conditions to run haywire, you're off your silly little noodle. You do as you're told hereafter! You do as you're told and exactly as you're told or I'll turn you right straight over to the juvenile courts and let them handle you. If you aren't home at the hours I designate, I'll ask them to send an officer to find you. Hereafter you may go to one movie, the early show, once a week on school days. You may stay out at decent places and proper hours on Friday and Saturday nights. On Sunday night you're to be in this house at ten o'clock. You're to report to me every place you have gone and whom you have been with."

I nodded my head.

"I think that's the gist of it. There may be some minor problems later on but we can iron them out as they arise. From now on, this house is regimented and don't you forget it. I'm glad you like my hair-do and my new outfit. I was afraid at first it might be a little too youthful for me, but I realize now that it's just what I've been needing. It certainly takes me back a few decades. Oh, there's the car for me! A few of us sophomores are going out to Pinky's Place for a dance. Bye now!"

She waved her hand and tripped down the hall in her ridiculous feather and her dyed hair. We remained in our chairs, frozen, literally frozen, staring at the doorway.

She opened the front door. "Oh, there you are, Mrs. Gillespie! On time to the fraction of a minute!" It was a man's voice, speaking cordially.

The door closed again. A motor started, a car got into motion.

"Girls," Father said, in a voice so sepulchral it made tax bills and questionnaires seem almost jolly in comparison, "girls, your mother has gone mad!"

Our eyes came back from the doorway with a visible jerk.

We looked at one another, aghast, horrified. After a long agonizing moment, Doris buried her face in her arms on the table and began to cry. Father fished a cigar out of his pocket and bit the end off so distractedly he almost swallowed it. I just sat there.

"Mad," he repeated hoarsely, "stark, staring mad! It's the war did it!"

Doris wept convulsively. It's a terrible thing to sit at the table and see a parent you have lived with all your life go mad before your very eyes. I felt I had to do something to break the ice so I got up and began removing the soiled dishes. But I did it in a daze, a blue daze. It was more than a daze, it was utter funk. Father smoked, chewing on the end of his cigar, and Doris went on crying.

"Father," I ventured finally, "don't you think she—really did look awfully—good-looking?"

"She's too damned good-looking! That's the trouble!" he shouted. I carried out more dishes.

"It isn't really a trouble to be good-looking," I tried again, on the next trip in. "Quite the contrary, I should think."

"Dad!" Doris broke in suddenly. "You don't suppose she really has gone to Pinky's Place, do you?"

"Of course she has! You heard what she said!"

"Dad, she can't!" Doris was almost screaming. "She can't go there! She mustn't go there! It's no place for—a lady!"

"You go there once or twice a week, don't you?" Father demanded.

"Yes, but—but I'm—a different generation!"

"Yes, and a damned poor one, in my opinion!" he retorted sharply. He chewed harder on his cigar. "What's wrong with Pinky's Place?" he asked uneasily.

"It's terrible. It's perfectly awful. It's full of smoke and there's too much drinking and the dancing—some of the dancing is disgraceful, and the floor show—the floor show is almost naked. And the noise is bedlam, simply bedlam. You know how she hates noise."

She put her head on the table and began to cry again.

I had all the dishes out, so I went back and sat down at the table. I knew I had to wash them later on but there was no reason Doris shouldn't dry them. She couldn't cry all night and I felt as bad about Mother as she did.

The telephone rang and we all jumped.

"If that's your mother," Dad said quickly, "tell her I'll come and fetch her home as soon as she is ready. No trouble at all. I'm not busy tonight."

"If it's for me," Doris said, "tell him I'm sick, tell him I'm dead, tell him I'm not here."

I answered the telephone. Ordinarily Doris beat me to it. The call was for Doris and I said politely that she was tied up and would not be in all evening, so no use to call again. When I went back to the table she did not even ask who it was.

"What does she expect me to do?" Doris wailed again. "Is she asking me to go back to school on an allowance of a dollar a week? She doesn't seem to realize there's a war on!"

"Evidently she's not asking anything," Dad said. "She was just telling you."

"She said you could go someplace and room and board if you want to," I reminded her reasonably.

"I don't want to! Why should I? What would people think of me, living in a stuffy boardinghouse with my own home right here in town?"

"You could go to some other town," I suggested. "There are other towns just as close to Du Pont as we are."

"I always knew you wanted to get rid of me!" Doris said bitterly. "You and Mother both! You both hate me!"

That was silly but I knew she didn't mean it. People say such absurd things when they are upset. Until she went in for war work and cinematics, Doris was a very grand person and even at her worst she was a lot better than some of the other win-the-warriors around town.

"What I can't understand is why she picked on me that way," Father said aggrievedly. "You'd think it was my fault that the government is driving me out of my senses with questionnaires and forms and bills, to say nothing of taxes. You'd think it was some-

thing I had thought up myself. If I ignore them, they'll send me to jail. She acted as if it was all my fault. I suppose she wants me to go to jail."

"Well, Father," I said, trying to be helpful, "it really does get a little on our nerves to have you stalking around the house clanking your questionnaires at us like a ghost with his chains. I can ignore you and get my mind on other things but Mother can't. She's so much older and more set in her ways."

"She didn't seem very set in her ways tonight," he snapped back. "Anything but set in her ways!"

"And turning me out of my own home before I'm even old enough to vote," wailed Doris.

"You'll be eighteen next month," I reminded her. "You could hardly find a place and get moved into it before your birthday. You'll be of age then."

"I knew you wanted to get rid of me! You just want to have everything your own way around here!"

"Your mother was absolutely right about you, Cherry!" Father turned on me with disconcerting suddenness. "I can't imagine what's come over you! Don't think we didn't hear you sneaking in at one-thirty last night when you had strict orders to be in at ten! Strict orders! I heard them myself. Absolutely right—about you! If we can't handle you from this on we'll turn you over to somebody that can."

"That was purely accidental," I said. "I'm very sorry. It won't happen again, I assure you."

"It better not happen again! I can't imagine what's come over you all!"

"And sneaking down to Mill Run with those boys every Sunday too!" Doris put in indignantly. "It's disgraceful, that's what it is, disgraceful. I'm surprised the juvenile court or somebody hasn't picked you up long ago! I didn't say anything but I knew what was going on. I was too ashamed to say anything."

"Nothing was going on but eating everything we had money enough to buy, and talking!" I defended myself hotly. "And there was always a swarm of noisy little brats chucking baseballs at us. There's nothing disgraceful about that."

"You've got a home to eat and talk in, haven't you?" Father said. But he spoke absent-mindedly. "There's no use taking to the woods for that sort of thing. It's just a sample of what we're up against! . . . I suppose she wants me to ignore the blanks and go to jail. That would be respectable, wouldn't it? Very respectable."

"She doesn't expect you to ignore them," I said, grateful for the turn of conversation. "She just wants you to fill them in without groaning. And Dad, if the *Herald Tribune* upsets you so much, why don't you read a lighter-minded paper with comic strips?"

"If I pay room and board I'll be nothing but a stranger in my own home," Doris broke in. "If I take an extra glass of milk she'll want a nickel for it! Think of having to pay a nickel every time you take a glass of milk—in your own home, right in your own home! A nickel a glass! A stranger in my own home, that's what I'll be!"

"You are anyhow," I said. I didn't care which way we were talking as long as I was out of the limelight myself. "What do we ever see of you? We just hear the bath water running and watch you eat with one hand and primp with the other. There's nothing very familylike about that!"

While Doris and I did up the dishes—I washing, of course, because she had to protect her manicure for war-work morale—Father listened to the news on the radio. Not a groan out of him. But he was restless. He kept moving around and fussing with things. He straightened the books and magazines on the table. He adjusted the ash trays. He tinkered with the flowers in the ivory vase. And he smoked all the time, although usually he had just one cigar after dinner and one before he went to bed.

When we went in I settled right down to my homework. I had already done it for the next day, at least I had done it well enough, but I had some back assignments to make up and this seemed a good time to get started. I can't say that my mind was really on it, though. Doris sat bolt upright in a stiff chair. Once she started to touch her hair with her hands but suddenly jerked them back as if they had slapped her face. She put them under her and sat on them. Father kept on tinkering around.

Several times the phone rang. Neither of them made a move toward it.

"If it's your mother, tell her I'll come for her immediately," Father said each time.

"If it's for me, tell him I'm dead," Doris added.

It was never Mother. Always it was for Doris or me and I cut them off politely but without leaving room for any back talk.

"Can you imagine her doing such things to herself?" Doris said. "Trying to look like Mrs. Delafield—that's what she's doing."

"Your mother is a better-looking woman than Gorge Delafield ever dreamed of being," Father said shortly.

She was, too. Other people had always said she was beautiful, though her hair was shining silver over her temples. But we were so used to her we never thought much about it. We thought about it that night, though. She was a very good-looking woman, in spite of her age.

At the stroke of ten on the hall clock Father said, "You girls had better go up now. You know your mother likes you to turn in early on school and workdays. We must be careful not to upset her."

We went up without a word and whispered our good nights in the hall. I left my door ajar so I could hear what happened when Mother came in. I suppose Doris did too. At midnight I heard Father coming upstairs. He walked slowly and his feet sounded heavy.

At half-past one Mother came. She did not try to be quiet. She hummed while she was tinkering around downstairs. She let Skivar out and whistled loudly for him to come in. When she came upstairs she did not walk tiptoe to keep her high heels from clicking and did not avoid the right side of the fourth step from the top, which had a bad creak. She went into her room and presently came out and went to the bathroom. She let the water run as noisily as if it were daytime. I listened until her door closed again and then I suppose I went to sleep.

I heard her go downstairs as usual the next morning; front door, back door, icebox. Then, from the foot of the stairs:

"Doris! Dad!"

Three pairs of feet hit the floor simultaneously. We were polite about turns at the bathroom. There was no pounding on the door, no impatient calling, "Hurry up! Do you think I've got all day?"

I was down first and headed for the kitchen. "Good morning, Mother. Shall I set the table?"

"Good morning, Cherry. All set, thanks. Connect the toaster, will you, and keep an eye on the toast?"

I stole a look at her slantwise. She looked odd, in the morning light, with her hair showing gold instead of silver. And she had rouge and make-up on and was wearing her second-best negligee. Otherwise she looked about the same.

"Your hair looks lovely, Mother," I said. "I thought it was lovely before, with those white waves, but it does look—gayer—this way."

"Has it had any effect on your morale yet?" she asked dryly. But she smiled and her eyes were twinkling.

"My morale's okay anyhow," I said. "I'm nothing but a schoolgirl—and glad of it," I added the hasty afterthought.

"Schoolgirls have to watch their morale, too," she said soberly. "Schoolgirls and housewives more than anybody else, I think."

"I guess so," I said meekly. I certainly wasn't going to upset her if I could help it.

Dad came down next. "Good morning, Helen," he said cheerfully. "Looks like a gorgeous September day. Have a nice time last night?"

"Wonderful," she said. "But I'm afraid I'll have to get used to night hours by degrees. I was so sleepy this morning I was tempted to chuck the clock right out the window. I was certainly getting in a rut. It's a good thing I found it out in time, isn't it?"

I could see him eying her hair uneasily but he didn't say anything. He sat down at the table and glanced at the headlines but didn't touch the paper.

Doris put in a more diffident appearance. "Good morning, Mother," she said inquiringly, as if not quite sure whether she would be spoken to.

"Good morning, Doris. Oh, what a cute little blouse! Where did you get it? I need a new one badly."

"I got it at Hammerley's," Doris said.

"It's really sweet. Don't you like it, Cherry? Was it very expensive, Doris? I rather overtaxed my clothes budget yesterday, with those two dresses and the silly hat, not to mention the hair-do."

We all forced a smile because we always smiled at mention of

Mother's clothes budget. She allowed for it but hardly ever got any good out of it because there was always something someone else seemed to be needing at the time.

"It was eight ninety-eight," Doris said, flushing a little. "It's very good material and well tailored. It ought to wear well."

"It doesn't pay to buy cheap stuff," Mother said. "That blouse I got for two twenty-nine went to pieces in the third laundry. It was supposed to have been marked down from something, but it just goes to show that it doesn't pay! Something like that ought to go nicely with my suit—in rose, maybe, or tangerine? Wouldn't you think so, Cherry?"

We talked all through breakfast but Mother did not give us a gay account of what had happened the night before. Doris finally mustered up courage to ask, "Didn't you find it rather noisy at Pinky's, Mother?"

"Yes, rather noisy. But it is a noisy age. We may as well get used to it."

That was all.

When Dad and Doris were ready to leave she said briskly, "Here's your paper, Dad! I'll have the list ready for you this evening, Doris! Bye-bye! Don't forget we've got a war to win."

Doris turned back. Her lips parted as if she had something to say. She stood poised for a brief instant but all she said was, "Bye, Mother."

When I was ready to start to school she followed me to the door but didn't say anything.

"Mother," I said, speaking very fast, "do you think we should settle on Wednesday for my weekday night at the movies? I just want to know in case somebody should ask me."

"Wednesday would be all right, or any night. Wouldn't it be better to leave it indefinite, so you could take advantage of the best picture—and the best date?"

"Doesn't it make any difference which night it is?"

"Not a bit—as long as it's one movie a week and the early show. I really prefer you to see the best pictures—and enjoy the best dates."

"Thanks, Mother. So long!"

She seemed all right that morning.

When school was out I beat it for home. I met Lieutenant Ashley on the street and he invited me for a coke but I said I was in a great hurry that day and would take a rain check on it. Lieutenant Ashley was a temporary heart-throb of Dorry's.

I had it pretty nice both ways. It wasn't only that the grown-up girls who liked Larry were polite to me. I got a few pickings from Dorry's set, too. Dorry was very popular, and while she always made it plain to her friends that I was just a schoolgirl, I was nearly as tall as she and all the boys who were trying to make up to her went out of their way to do pleasant little odd turns for me. Ice cream and candy and cokes. Sometimes movies. But that day I was so anxious to know how Mother was making out that I turned thumbs down on Lieutenant Ashley's proposition without a flicker of regret.

Mother was at home all right. I saw her glance at the clock. I glanced at it, too. It was half past three.

They had moved our school hours up so we could get home and out of the way before the day shift left the war plants to jam up transportation, but even so it was usually getting along toward five before I got home.

"You're early," Mother said.

"Yes. I met Lieutenant Ashley and he invited me for a coke but I didn't go."

"Dear me!" Mother said. She was smiling. "It must have been a pleasant surprise for your overworked stomach."

"The movie will be Wednesday this week, Mother. Okay? It's a grand picture and the date is Artie Williams."

"A hundred percent on both counts, I take it," she said, still smiling.

I felt pretty good. Evidently she was not holding too much against me. I made up my mind to be careful as the dickens, for a while at least. I was glad I wasn't in poor Dorry's shoes.

In my heart I didn't blame her a bit for preferring war work to high school. I'd have preferred it myself if I had the chance. It wasn't only the money she was earning and the sense of feeling that she was in the war up to her ears. But you couldn't believe how in one short summer vacation everything worth going for had gone out of high school, except education, and there wasn't anything

really glamorous about education. The upper classes, Dorry's and mine, the senior and junior, were simply denuded of attraction.

All the big, lively, good-looking boys were gone, some of them into the service, the rest into war jobs. When school reopened after Labor Day, they, like Doris, stuck to their jobs and thumbed their noses at book learning. The snappy, up-and-coming girls, like Doris, were gone, too.

Our three most interesting men teachers had gone the way of the war. Our adorable little English teacher had joined the WACs. Our Latin teacher, who was a little horse-faced and mule-tempered, but a very fine teacher who kept you on your toes every minute, had switched over to FBI. Classes had been doubled up so teachers were handling subjects they hadn't specialized in and didn't care much about, and the substitutes we got—well, they were just what you would expect of people who kept on teaching instead of doing something big and exciting when so many big and exciting things were going on everywhere else.

High school was a dud, a complete dud. It didn't take me a week to find it out either. It stuck out like a sore thumb the very first day.

And poor Doris, after three months of glory, either had to go back to it, or leave home, or pay board like a stranger. Personally, I thought she would stick to Du Pont and pay board. I was sure she wouldn't give up our home. It was too nice to come back to, too nice to bring friends to. And I must say that both Mother and Dad always made things pleasant for our friends. I tried to make things pleasant for Dorry's friends, too, partly in return for the treats maybe, but I tried to be pleasant. All my set adored her and the girls tried to walk and talk like her and when the boys got burned up with Junie and me about anything they were always wondering why we had to be so pigheaded instead of more like Doris.

So I was sure she wouldn't leave home, but I knew she would hate to pay board because she used up her salary as fast as she got it. She bought a war bond every two weeks and was scrupulous about hanging onto them for the war's sake but just the same, for all her big salary, she owed me five dollars that she had borrowed out of my skimpy little allowance. Mother didn't know about that.

I sat there looking at my homework but all the time I was thanking my lucky stars I wasn't in Dorry's shoes.

Father got home early, too. He came in looking anxious at first, then relieved and then actually pleasant. For the first time since I could remember he didn't drag along and exhibit a brief case full of questionnaires that he had to fill out or go to jail. He was quite chatty. He had seen some of Mother's friends in town and told her all about them. He even remembered a funny story he had heard at luncheon and repeated it with gusto. Mother and I laughed heartily.

Doris came in on tiptoe. "Mother here?" she whispered to me. I pointed to the kitchen. She brightened up and called, "Hello, Mother! Working gal reporting for chow! Down in a minute!"

She went upstairs but came down almost immediately. "Did she make out that list?" she whispered to me.

"I didn't see any list," I whispered back.

She went to the kitchen and asked if she could do anything to help but Mother said she had everything under control. "I can't get used to you with that hair, Mother," Doris said cheerfully. "It's becoming, it's very becoming, but it's so surprising. Surprisingly becoming you might say. It makes you look like—"

"Like Gorge?" Mother inquired briefly.

"Oh, better than that! Much better. Like a dyed-in-the-wool glamor puss."

"Dyed-in-the-head would be more nearly accurate," Mother said, but she laughed.

When we were at dinner Father said, "Helen, how about going to a movie tonight? Blake was telling me there's one worth seeing at the Palace."

"Grand! I'd love it!" Mother said immediately. "I'll go bare-headed. I'm dying to show off my hair-do."

"Mother," Doris broke in suddenly, "if I go back to high school do I have to worry along on the same old picayune allowance?"

"Why not? You have an extensive and expensive wardrobe and you won't have many extraneous expenses, with dates to pay for your sodas and movies and Dad paying for the refreshments when

you have guests here. And you must have saved something out of your salary all these weeks."

Doris flashed a warning glance at me. I didn't flick an eyelash. I wouldn't give her away for anything but I felt a little uneasy about my five dollars. "My expenses have been high," she said meekly, "what with Red Cross and Canteen and USO and withholding tax—and always collecting for something! You can't imagine the things they are always collecting for! And I couldn't act like a skinflint, so I always had to contribute."

"I think perhaps, if Dad agrees, since you are a senior this year—if you go back—we might make it two dollars instead of one. But we would certainly expect you to put a fair percent into war stamps."

Doris winced. I knew she was thinking of her nice crisp war bonds every two weeks. "Well, I chucked the job today," she said briefly. "I didn't know you felt so seriously about it." I don't know why she didn't know it. I knew it. They had certainly made it painfully plain all through August. "Would you mind, Mother," she went on, diffidently, "if I work two hours after school each evening and four on Saturday morning? They asked if I could and I said I would find out and let them know tomorrow."

Mother hesitated. "In normal times, Dorry, I'd say no and say it flatly. A schoolgirl needs to conserve both her time and her strength as much as possible. But these are not normal times. I must say I do not feel that two hours of war work will be more of a drain on your health than constant movies, dances and dates. What do you think, Dad?"

"Up to you, my dear, entirely up to you. You know what the girls can stand better than I do. I trust your judgment implicitly."

Mother lowered her lashes to hide the twinkle that I, sitting next to her, glimpsed in her eyes. "What evening hours would you work, Doris?" she asked.

"Four to six."

"Could you get there from school?"

"Yes. Bart Nielson and some of the others pool rides out for the shift that begins at four. I can ride out with them."

"We can move the dinner hour up to seven. Would you work every evening?"

"Except Saturday and Sunday. But there would be four hours on Saturday morning."

"That would give you two evenings for recreation. What do you think, Dad?"

"It's entirely up to you, Mother. In my opinion Du Pont is not a bit harder on a girl's health than Pinky's Place."

Mother laughed. "You're probably right. But in that case, Dorry, you will get your spending money from what you earn and will not rate a family allowance."

Doris glanced at me again. "Well, that's all right. I don't know yet what they'll pay me, but it can't be less than fifty cents an hour. I'll have to pay my share of the expense for the car going out and my bus fare home but I ought to be a little in the black, even so."

"Doris," Mother said, "I appreciate this very much. It makes me very happy. Dad and I have often talked it over and we know that young people do not realize what it means to them and to their future to carry on with their education as normally as possible in these most abnormal times. We know from experience that ninety-nine out of a hundred students who quit school to work for a while never go back. We didn't want you to be one of the ninety-nine."

She had said the same thing at least a thousand times before school opened but this time it seemed to register.

Father beamed at Doris, he actually beamed. "That's fine, my girl, that's great! You've made the right decision and you will never regret it. I'm proud of you."

I was proud of her, too. I was so proud I thought, "Oh, what the heck if I never get my five dollars back?" Just the same, I reminded her of it until I got it. But I was proud of her. I knew she was doing it to humor Mother in her madness, just as Father was, taking her out to a movie, and as I was, too, plugging along with my homework and keeping preposterous hours.

But Doris was making the biggest sacrifice and I was proud of her. I knew better than she did how frightfully stupid high school was, with Clem and Lance and Bertie and Stooge, the pick of the senior class, all off at war or working.

Mother and Dad were so pleased they invited us to go to the movie with them, but we magnanimously said we thought they were en-

titled to a splurge all by themselves for a change. I was remembering my "one a week" regimentation so it was no hardship for me to decline.

We saw them off gaily, Mother in her silly feather which showed up her hair even better than when she was bareheaded. At the door she said, "Now don't wait up for us, girls, and don't expect us early. We may drop in at Pinky's for a dance on the way home."

Father started to groan but remembered himself just in time and turned it into a cough. He managed to muster a weak "Good idea, Helen, good idea. Make a night of it."

Doris and I were quiet for a while after they had gone. Then she said, almost whispering although we were alone in the house, "Don't you think she seems a little better today, Cherry?"

"Yes, as long as she gets her own way about everything. But when she's telling me what's what, there's a sort of cold gleam in her eye that sends shivers up and down my back."

"Father's doing pretty well, isn't he?"

Suddenly we were both laughing.

"It's worth a little insanity," Doris said, "just a *little* insanity, maybe, not much, if it stops his eternal beefing. You'd think the government had appointed him exclusively to fill out their questionnaires. I've had to fill out about a thousand myself, in triplicate, too, but you didn't hear me complaining."

"I still think if he'd read a more humorous newspaper it would help his digestion," I said. "How about my five dollars?"

"I'll have to pay it off a little at a time, I'm afraid."

"They paid you off today when you resigned, didn't they?"

"Yes, but it wasn't much. And I still owe half on that last dress I got. I'll give you a war bond as security if you want it."

"Oh, that isn't necessary," I said generously. "Just don't try to abscond on me, that's all."

We laughed together again. It was almost like old times before she went all out for war work.

Mother and Dad didn't go to Pinky's Place. They met some friends at the movie and went to their house and had Welsh rabbit and beer and came home around midnight in a very cheerful frame of mind. We were in bed but wide awake. We heard them laughing. Father

made fun of the feather she called a hat but he did it in a pleasant way and Mother liked it.

Almost like old times! . . . Except that Larry wasn't in his room at the end of the hall to bound out of bed and shout down over the banister, "Whoever is coming upstairs at this indecent hour, kindly bring me a sandwich and a glass of milk! Make it two sandwiches!"

### III

DORIS WAS game about her great sacrifice. I saw her eyes flicker over the crowd gathered outside the school when we got off the bus that morning. I saw them darken and shadow. But when the crowd flocked eagerly around her, welcoming her back, chaffing her a little, she greeted them gaily enough. She went in quickly, though, to arrange with the teachers for making up the work she had missed.

I was glad to have her back. She wasn't in any of my classes, nor even in my study periods, but it cheered me up to know she was somewhere around the building and I looked forward to meeting her unexpectedly in the halls.

Moving the dinner hour up thirty minutes didn't make any difference and while the new regime must have been tough on Doris, she never complained. She had to study hard to catch up with the class and make up the back work, but she buckled right down to it. For the most part we were pleasant and cheerful around the house, talking about things that had come up during the day and what we were planning to do in the future. Almost like old times. Only Larry was not there to turn and twist every word into something to laugh at, as he always did. We couldn't expect it to be exactly like old times, with Larry gone; we wouldn't want it. But on the whole things went very well.

Except once in a while when we forgot, we humored Mother punctilioiusly, to prevent another attack and getting her face lifted. We dressed up a little more, playing up to her new hair-do and the clothes she had bought. Since it was dark at seven, she began having

candles on the dinner table every night instead of just holidays and Sundays as before. Doris rose to the situation and brought fresh flowers in with her two or three times a week. We really made a very nice dinner setup, and when people happened to drop in while we were at the table, I was well satisfied with our appearance.

When I got home from school I bounded straight in and told Mother exactly where I had been, and whether it was Larry's or Dorry's friend who had set them up, or, as rarely happened, one of my own. Sometimes, but never if we could help it, some of us girls went in alone and had things Dutch. But I always told her immediately and she said it was all right.

If I were as much as fifteen minutes late getting home on my nights out, I apologized immediately with elaborate details. And Dad got me aside next morning and warned me if I did anything to upset Mother he would cut off my allowance for six weeks. But even that dire prospect did not terrify me as much as the idea of another of those spells. I was very careful. We all were.

There was one change. Mother spent every cent of her clothes allowance on herself. Every time she went to town she came home with something for herself, a dressing gown, a blouse, gloves, stockings, something for her and nothing for us. We had our own clothes allowance, but for so many years we had used most of Mother's that we had begun counting on it as much as our own. Not any more.

Doris had laid in a good supply while she was in war work so she was all right, but everything I got came out of my own skimpy budget. That was about the only difference. That, and a straight hard look in Mother's eyes when I went out evenings. I watched the time so closely, remembering that look, that I might as well have been punching a time clock.

Then something happened.

I was at home when it happened. I was doing my homework as fast as I could because the best movie and the best date were for Tuesday and it was Tuesday. The doorbell rang and Mother, looking elegant in her golden hair and her best house gown, went to the door.

I heard her give a little gasp. Then she said, "Why, hello, Gorge!"

"Hello, Helen." It was Mrs. Delafield's voice, a lilting voice, up on one syllable and down the next.

"Oh, you want to see Doris, don't you?" Mother said. She spoke pleasantly but there was gravel in that remark. "I'm so sorry. She isn't home yet. She works at Du Pont a couple of hours after school."

"No, I don't want to see Doris. I want to see you." Her voice sounded a little breathless. "Are you busy?"

"No, of course not. How nice! Come in, Gorge! You don't mind my calling you Gorge, do you? It seems so natural."

"No, I don't mind; I like it. It reminds me that I used to belong to something."

She smiled when, coming in, she saw me at the desk.

"Have you met my other daughter, Gorge? This is Cherry, Mrs. Delafield."

"I've seen her lots of times," Mrs. Delafield said.

I got a good look at them both, standing there together in broad daylight, and I give you my word, Mother looked younger and smoother. For the first time I could see that there were tight little lines at the corner of Mrs. Delafield's eyes and lips. Her eyes—if they had been anybody else's eyes—I would have said were sad and panicky. But I reminded myself that Mrs. Delafield, always so gay, couldn't be sad and panicky.

I picked up my books politely and said I'd take my homework out to the sun porch. I went out but I didn't latch the sun-porch door. I couldn't stand not knowing what Mrs. Delafield wanted to see Mother about. I wondered if Doris, for all her show of exemplary conduct, had been up to some mischief. So I left the door unlatched and took the chair nearest it.

"Oh, Helen, you have had your hair done!" Mrs. Delafield said. "It looks lovely—but I'm so sorry. That day I saw you on the lawn I thought how beautiful it was with the sun making silver of it. I decided to let mine go natural, too. But I didn't. I was afraid the young people might think I was—too old."

"They have been thinking me old for years," Mother said. "So I yielded to the temptation to prove that I am not Mrs. Methuselah."

"Helen, Doris says your son is in Ireland!" Mrs. Delafield changed

the subject so abruptly it made me jump and nearly drop a couple of books. I grabbed them just in time.

"Yes, he is. That is, he was. He's been hinting that things are going on and maybe we shan't be hearing from him quite so regularly for a while."

"Mine is in England."

"Your—your—"

"My son. Steve."

"I didn't know you had a son," Mother said faintly. "Doris never mentioned it."

"She doesn't know it. . . . Do you hear from your son often? His name is Larry, isn't it?"

"Yes. Larry. Yes, we hear often and quite regularly. But we can't hear often enough to suit us! We'll never hear often enough until he's shouting down over the banister the way he used to."

"Do his letters sound like him? Do they sound like the boy he used to be?"

"Of course! Just like him. Every line we read we can see the way his head goes back, his eyes twinkle, his lips laugh, over what he is saying and thinking."

"Steve's do not. Steve has changed. Something has happened to him."

"Is he sick?"

"No, not sick. I don't think he's sick. Maybe heartsick. Or maybe puzzled. That's more like it, I think: puzzled."

Mother didn't say anything.

"At first, it was home he wrote about. He said all the soldiers he met, American, British, French, everybody talked about home—their homes, their little towns, their cliques, their rackets and rows and good times. He said he was the only one who never had a home."

"But—he had a home—he had to have a home." Mother sounded distraught and helpless.

"Well, no, not really. Not a regular home. We traveled a great deal. When his father was living we had to travel because that was his business. I went with him because I liked it. Lots of the time we left Steve in boarding schools, good ones, very good ones, but not like

a home of course. When his father died, I went different places—because I was used to it and . . . I still liked it. Steve had what anybody else would consider every advantage in the world—travel, experience, education, enough money for anything we wanted. But we never settled in any place long enough to—what he said in one letter was, we never settled down long enough to let our seeds sprout; we never took root."

"Children do not realize that one kind of advantage offsets another," Mother said comfortingly.

"But he was right, Helen. Children are entitled to a home, to familiar places, to old friendships. And those he never had. So I worked over his letters until I thought I got what he was driving at. That's why I came. That's why I came back here. So that when he comes home he'll find—oh, much too late I know!—but he will find a home and young friends ready to receive him. That's why I'm trying to make friends with this young crowd, so they will be ready to be his friends when he comes home."

"Gorge," Mother said, and her voice stumbled a little, "will you please forgive me? I have so completely misunderstood you. I couldn't imagine what had come over you, seeking companionship in children of an age to be your own. But I didn't know you had a child of your own! I might have suspected! It was for him."

"Yes, of course. To have everything ready for him to step into. I know it's late, very late, but late really is better than never."

"Yes, much better."

"That isn't all, Helen," she said eagerly. "Does your son, Larry, say much in his letters about religion?"

"Religion!" I could tell Mother was shocked all over again. "Religion, Gorge? Why, no, he doesn't say much, he doesn't say anything about religion. Sometimes he tells about services he has attended, or chaplains he has met. Sometimes he speaks of odd religious customs he has come across but that's all. That's all I can remember."

"Was he a religious boy, was he fond of religious things when he was young?"

"No, not especially. He went to Sunday school. Sometimes he went to church but not if he could get out of it. I taught him to say his prayers when he was a baby. I don't know how long he kept it

up. Not long, I fancy. We used to ask a blessing at the table but we gave it up—the children were so noisy and always in such a hurry. No, I am sure he was not especially inclined toward religion. At least, not that I know of. I should be ashamed to make such an admission, Gorge, and I am ashamed; but if he ever had any inclination toward—anything religious—I never knew it."

"I am ashamed, too, Helen. I didn't send Steve to Sunday school. We traveled so much and it was never very convenient. And some way it seemed childish and—old-fashioned. But I often took him to church with me."

"What church?"

"Oh, any church. Usually the one that was—well, the most outstanding where we were at the time. The one that had the most famous minister, or the best music, or the most beautiful stained-glass windows, the one that was best known. But he never seemed at all interested."

"Then why do you think he's interested now?"

"Because in almost every letter he says something about it. At first it was casual. It was rather joking, because some of the men he met made such a fetish of their religion. But his remarks became less casual and not at all joking. He said once, 'We never had any religion ourselves, did we? No home, no religion. What did we have?' It made me feel like an infidel. He often mentions it. When he went for his first flight over the Channel, he said he prayed. He said he felt like a fool but he did it anyhow. He said he sort of lost himself in it. But when he took the plane up and headed out and over he wasn't afraid at all. He said he hadn't time to keep on praying while he was on the job, but he reminded himself not to forget it and he didn't forget it. Helen, he said I ought to try it."

Her voice broke and the sound was a little sob. I wished from the bottom of my heart I had closed that door.

"You should be happy about that, Gorge," Mother said, and her voice was not very steady. "If he has found something—to cling to—you should thank God."

"Yes. I suppose so. I wanted him to cling to me," Mrs. Delafield said. "I adore him, Helen. But I am such a fool. I never do things the right way. We were alone so much, I wanted him to feel that I

was his companion, his intimate chum. I didn't try to be like a mother. I let the maids and nurses do all the personal, messy things one has to do for children. I let them wait on him. I wanted to be his friend. Now I know I failed him. He could find chums anywhere. It was a mother he wanted in me. Helen, you don't mind my coming to you like this? I had to. I try to tell myself that all the boys over there, facing death every hour—they all feel that way. Want to be religious, like to pray. Steve says he feels God when he goes up. I never feel God, do you? God knows I pray for him but—I don't think I even know how. When he has done twenty-five missions he can come home on leave. That's why I have to work fast, I haven't much time. What do you think he means, when he goes up he feels God?"

"Maybe it's the going up—going heavenward," Mother said. I knew she felt bad and wanted to be a comfort if she could—but couldn't. "Maybe it's the going up . . . and the danger—"

"It's more than that," Mrs. Delafield said sadly. "I'm doing the best I can, Helen. I go to church every Sunday, but I don't get a thing out of it. I read the Bible every day, hours a day, and say my prayers, but I don't get anything—not anything at all. I don't feel God. I don't feel anything. All I want is to be whatever it is that Steve wants to come home to and I don't know how. I thought maybe you could tell me."

Mother's voice was so husky I had to listen closely to follow her. "I wish I could, Gorge. I wish to heaven I could. But I can't. We haven't traveled as you have, we haven't lived in smart places and met important people and done big things. But right here at home we've drifted along just as you have. The church seemed so cut and dried. Religion was stereotyped. Since Larry left, I have prayed for him every day and many times a day, but I never feel anything. Not a thing. It's just habit. I pray because I was brought up to believe that prayers should be said in a crisis. I try to tell myself that I trust God, pray His will be mine and all that, as we were taught, but it's just words. I don't feel God. I just feel that I want Larry safe and well and home again."

I was crying, but very softly. I could have cut my heart out for not closing that door. They were crying, too. And even in that

tragic moment I could not help wondering if Mrs. Delafield's mascara would run. Mother didn't use eye make-up but Mrs. Delafield did.

"Perhaps Larry feels the same way," Mother said brokenly. "Perhaps he writes us gay, joking letters because . . . he thinks that's all we want. Maybe he thinks we don't care whether he feels God or not."

"He would tell you, Helen," Mrs. Delafield said softly. "He would tell you. Youth is so frank, so ruthlessly and cruelly frank. He would tell you."

"Not if he thought we weren't interested," Mother said. "You don't know Larry! If he thought we weren't interested . . . But I'm going to find out! I'm going to find out right now!"

She went to her desk and I could hear the rattle of papers. It was so still in the living room that from where I was, as close to the door as I could get and so close I couldn't get away from it now that I wanted to, I could hear their breathing, their two breathings. I could hear the beat of my own blood but that wasn't surprising, for it was the devil's own tattoo it was pounding out.

"Listen, Gorge," Mother said in a sharp, high voice. "This is what I'm saying. And I'm going to have Cherry take it straight down to the post office and send it air mail. I'm just saying, 'Son, I want you to answer these questions. I want you to tell me the truth, not what you think I might like to hear. Do you pray over there? Have you tried to find and to feel God? Have you succeeded? Are you at all religious? I want the truth.' That's all and Cherry can take it—"

"I'll take it," Mrs. Delafield said. "I pass the office. I think that's wonderful, Helen. It will help me so much—it will help me to help Steve—no, it will help me help myself. I need it worse than he does. I'll go right away. I can hardly wait for his answer."

Mother banged hard on the envelope and the stamp. I didn't turn my head, I didn't dare, but I knew just what was going on.

"Helen," Mrs. Delafield said, "you'll help me, won't you? If you thought I was trying to be young again, I suppose everybody else thought the same thing?"

Her voice made a definite question of it.

"They thought it was a little . . . strange, Gorge," Mother said honestly. "I was going to give a coming-home party for you. But

when you went all out for Dorry's set, I laid off to await developments. Gorge, didn't you ever tell the children about your son?"

"No, Helen, another of my fool mistakes. I thought if they knew, it would make them realize I was just another mother and they would shy off. I wanted them to like me. Oh, Helen, you can't imagine what I've gone through! They're so noisy. They laugh so much. I sit there wondering what under heaven there is to laugh at! It nearly drove me mad at first. It's much easier now. I wanted to do it and I was happy doing it but at first I thought I'd go mad. I stuck to it. I had made up my mind and I stuck to it. Every night, before they came, when I put Steve's pictures away so they wouldn't see them and ask questions, I kissed them and said, 'At least I'm trying, Steve, I'm trying.' I thought if I could make them love me they would be sure to love him when he comes. He's very lovable, Helen. But what shall I do now? I seem to have got off on the wrong foot again. What shall I do now?"

"Tell them!" Mother said emphatically. "There's something very great—and very noble—underneath all this noise and laughter. Tell them exactly what you had in mind and what you're up to. They already love you, and they'll be grateful for your confidence. Put out Steve's pictures. Invite the crowd in and tell them it is for your son you covet their friendship."

"Oh, that's good, Helen, that's wonderful. I see what you mean. Yes, that's perfect. . . . But Helen, how can I win back the respect of . . . the mothers? Steve's very sensitive. He'll feel it if I am not . . . on motherly terms . . . with the other mothers."

"Leave it to me," Mother said. "I'll have my welcome-home party after all. I'll have every eligible mother in town here and then—poor Gorge! You'll have to put your cards on the table and tell them what you were up to! One thing you can be sure of: they'll all come!"

"My part is to put my cards on the table—and my son in their hands?"

"Right!"

"Helen, will you come and have luncheon with me tomorrow? We can work out the details then. I'll show you his letters and you'll see what I'm talking about."

"I'll come with gratitude and pleasure, Gorge. I'll bring some of Larry's letters, too. There may be things in them that I've overlooked."

"How long will it take to get an answer to this?"

"It shouldn't take more than two weeks—if he is still where he was! We send everything air mail."

"Helen, I feel better. I think I feel better. I have felt so terribly by myself all the time, like a cork bobbing in a big sea, a stormy sea—yes, and bombs falling around me. But I think I feel better."

"I think I do, too," Mother said. "In a way. I feel as if my eyes have been suddenly opened—and I am shocked at what I see. But I think maybe I feel better."

They went to the door. They did not say good-by. I think they kissed each other but I'm not sure. I curled up in the chair and shut my eyes so if Mother came to the sun porch she'd think I'd dozed off over my lessons. I felt I couldn't bear to see her eyes or to have her see mine.

But she didn't come to the sun porch. She closed the door and went upstairs.

## IV

WHEN MOTHER came down and started to prepare dinner I went out and asked if there was something I could do to help but she said she had things well afoot and for me to run back to my lessons. She did not look at me.

When she called us in to dinner, she had the bright, brittle look she had worn that fatal Monday. Father and Doris noticed it immediately and flashed warning glances to each other and to me. They had no need to warn me. I already knew.

Father started to swing into his new conversational routine but she was not responsive. She kept her eyes lowered to her own plate. She fiddled around with her food and silverware but she did not eat. Quite suddenly she broke into the middle of one of Father's determinedly cheerful sentences.

"By the way," she said, "I hereby offer Gorge Delafield a profound and humble apology. She is a noble woman. I should sit at her feet and take lessons in wisdom and sacrifice. I *am* going to sit at her feet and take lessons."

Father and Doris warned me with their eyes to keep my mouth shut. They needn't have. I had nothing to say. Neither had they. Mother's eyes were on her plate again.

Father cleared his throat. "It's an odd thing about human nature," he began slowly, in a reflective, philosophical tone of voice. "Perhaps there's something divine about it. I suppose if you dig deeply enough and seek for it faithfully you can find something pretty fine in almost anybody."

"Gorge Delafield is not 'almost anybody.' She is one in a million." Mother raised her eyes and gave us that cold, starry look. "One in a million!"

I saw that she was not going to take the edge off Mrs. Delafield's revelation to the young crowd about her son, so I reluctantly decided I wouldn't mention it either, though I had been planning to sneak into Dorry's room that night with the astounding news.

Nobody said anything for quite a while and nobody seemed to have much appetite.

"Girls," Mother said crisply after a long silence, "do you still say your prayers? Do you, Doris? And Cherry?"

The fullness of my feelings almost choked me.

Doris, being older, had to answer first. "Sometimes I do, Mother," she said gently. "Not always, but sometimes. And always before I go to sleep I ask God to take care of Larry."

"Do you think He hears you?" Mother asked.

"I don't know, Mother. I suppose so," poor Doris said miserably. "We were taught, weren't we, that He always hears us?"

"But do you *feel* Him listening? Do you feel that your prayer is reaching certain ears?"

"I don't know, Mother. I never thought much about it. I just know we were taught that He is always listening and always hears."

"You, Cherry," Mother turned on me abruptly.

"Once in a while I kneel down, Mother. Usually only when I'm in a jam or bothered about something. Sometimes in bed I say the

Lord's Prayer. Sometimes I go clear through but sometimes I'm afraid I get to thinking about other things. But," I added hastily, "I never forget to say 'God bless Larry.'"

"How about you, Dad?"

Dad looked as if he were on the verge of a stroke but his voice was carefully controlled. "I'm afraid we have all grown a little careless about—the sacred things of life," he said. "I don't pray as often as I should, Helen, I admit. Things are in such a turmoil, the world is so upset, I suppose I've got to thinking if God really is in His heaven there shouldn't be so much hell on earth. But like the girls, Helen, every night when I'm lying awake, I don't know that I pray—not exactly—but I hope from the bottom of my heart that God or Somebody is taking care of Larry."

"God or Somebody," she repeated bitterly. "We don't even ask God to bless the food we have, the most bountiful food in a starving world. I wonder it doesn't choke us!"

She got up from the table and went quickly out of the room and up the stairs. Father shook his head at us warningly.

When we heard the door of her room close he said in a low voice, "This is terrible, girls, terrible and tragic. We must humor her in everything. Any kind of nervous or mental upset is apt to take a violent religious turn. Normal people suddenly become religious fanatics. In many ways she still seems normal. We've got to humor her. We've got to say our prayers and go to church and if she wants us to ask the blessing we are going to do it. We've got to stand together and humor her! I can't imagine what brought this on!"

I knew what had brought it on but how could I tell them? I had no right to know the things I had overheard that afternoon. It had been very sad, but I didn't see any reason why it should play such havoc with Mother's nerves.

Doris and I did the dishes quietly and settled down to our homework. Father read the paper. She did not come down again that night. She seemed all right at breakfast, except that when Father said placatingly, "Helen, shall we ask a blessing on our food?" she answered sharply, "No! Until we feel gratitude in our hearts, let's not be hypocritical about it with our lips!"

Otherwise everything went off all right.

When I reached home after school, no sodas and no loitering by the way, she was there. I was dying to know what had happened between her and Mrs. Delafield at luncheon but I didn't dare ask and she volunteered no information. But she was pleasant. Her eyes were soft again and her voice was its usual mixture of motherly solicitude and humorous chiding.

We were at dinner when she remarked, not brittlely but conversationally, "I had luncheon with Gorge Delafield. The house is lovely and she's a remarkable woman. You're going to like her, Dad. I apologized for having thought her a chitter-brain."

"You told her—that?" Doris gasped.

"Of course. Why not? But I apologized and took it all back. She is anything but a chitter-brain." Father's eyes were on Doris so she kept still. "I am going to give a luncheon for her one day next week—some of the old friends and a few that she hasn't met yet."

"That's nice, Helen, that's fine," Dad said heartily.

I could see that both he and Doris were trying to figure out how Mrs. Delafield fitted into the puzzle of our family picture.

Mrs. Delafield was really on her toes. She called up that night and invited Doris to supper the next Sunday evening and before she hung up she asked to speak to me. Doris was surprised. I was, too.

"Cherry," she said in her pleasant voice, "I'm having what you call 'the old young crowd' in for supper Sunday evening. Won't you come? Just a little supper, very informal, and a lot of conversation. I shall shoo them out before very late. I should love to have you if you think you'd like it."

"I'd love it, if I won't be in the way. Dorry's set thinks I am still in pigtails."

She laughed. "I don't agree with them and I really want you. If you want to bring any of your pigtail crowd it's all right with me. But I particularly want you and I'll see to it that nobody pulls your curls."

I thought perhaps Mother had suggested it but she was as surprised as we were. Doris didn't like it very well. "Mother!" she said. "Cherry's too young for that crowd! It's the war-work and soldier set!"

"I'm willing to leave it to Gorge's judgment whether she's old

enough," Mother said. "If Gorge wants her and Cherry wants to go, she may go and with my blessing."

I was so excited I thought my heart would blow up inside me. I was a little ashamed, too, because I knew those things I had no business knowing. But the excitement outran the shame.

I said my prayers on my knees that night and I prayed hard. I can't say I really felt anything though—anything but excitement.

All I could think of the rest of that week was going to Mrs. Delafield's party, but I can't skip what happened on Sunday morning—Sunday afternoon, too, for that matter. They weren't exciting, like the party, but they had a bearing on things.

On Sunday morning, planning to let Father sleep late and hoping he would, which he never did, Mother came quietly to our rooms and said if we were going to Sunday school we must get up now. We both got up. Dad was down ahead of us.

Still humoring Mother in her fanaticism when she asked, "Are you going to church this morning, Dad?" he broke the routine by saying heartily, "Yes, Helen, I am. I think you're absolutely right about this thing. We have let turmoils and worries turn us away from God when they should have drawn us closer." Mother hadn't said anything of the sort so he must have been doing a little thinking on the side.

"Yes, certainly I'm going. We must try to get back to the things worth holding fast to."

Mother didn't say a word. Doris and I went to Sunday school and waited until they came in for church and we all marched down the aisle together. Everyone was surprised; it hadn't happened in years. I could hear whisperings as we proceeded to a middle pew. We learned later that some of them were afraid something had happened to Larry.

As we were sitting down, Mother noticed Mrs. Delafield across the aisle, alone, and motioned for her to join us. Father let her in and she sat between him and Mother. She and Mother held hands for a while, both smiling, both looking sad and worried.

I listened carefully to the sermon. Everytime I began thinking of the party I yanked my mind right back to the sermon. It seemed to be all right. People had always said that our minister, Dr. Gayne,

was a brilliant and scholarly man. I suppose he was. He prayed for everybody in what he called "high places," and the Army and the commanding officers, and he talked a good deal about politics and the war and literature and somehow tied them all together so that I wasn't always sure where Homer left off and Dante began. But he got the Bible into it some way so I decided it was all right.

As we left the church, I hung as close as I could to Mother and Mrs. Delafield, knowing those things I had no right to know, and wanting to know more. I heard Mrs. Delafield whisper, "Helen, did you get anything out of it?"

"Nothing, Gorge! Not a thing! As far as I'm concerned he might as well have been reading the dictionary!"

"There must be some way!" Mrs. Delafield said desperately. "There's got to be some way! We'll have to look for it."

For what happened that afternoon I have only myself to blame but I meant well and was only trying to help Mother and Mrs. Delafield. I was on my way over to Junie's when I met Dr. Gayne. It seemed a mere coincidence at the time but later I figured that the devil must have had a hand in it. I had nothing against Dr. Gayne. He was always nice to me and while he wasn't what I'd call exciting, he was all right as ministers go.

He stopped and shook hands, which he didn't usually do. He said he had been delighted to see us, a united family at the altar of divine worship, and asked if Larry was all right. I said he was. He hoped we had enjoyed the service. Right there I made my first mistake. I said we didn't go to enjoy it, we went to help our religion. He looked very much surprised. Finally he said, "Did you get help?"

"No, not especially. We'd already read most of it in the newspapers or heard it over the radio, except about Homer and the Inferno and we get that at school."

He said, "Why, Cherry, I had no idea you were so interested in spiritual matters!"

"I'm not," I disclaimed quickly. "I'm not a bit interested. But a lot of other people are. They're worried and nervous and they go to church to try to get back their religion and all they get is what they read in the papers. They want to hear about how to find God and all they hear is a rehash of the English or history class. They want

somebody to pray for them and all they get is a prayer for those in high places. There aren't any people in high places in our church so they might as well stay home and pray for themselves."

He took hold of my hand. I looked up and down the street but there was nobody in sight so I let him hold it.

"Cherry, you amaze me! I never dreamed you were so wrapped up in things of the spirit!"

"I'm not! I'm not a bit wrapped up! But some people are."

"Cherry," he said, "how many Christians, real Christians, with real spiritual experience—how many do you think we have in our church?"

"Why, they're all Christians, aren't they?"

"Maybe they're not heathens. Maybe they're not infidels. But real Christians, with real spiritual experience, I know of only four. Just four, Cherry. You're the fifth."

"Not me!" I said, beginning to back away from him. "I'm not real either. I've never had any experience."

"Yes, you, Cherry! You are the fifth. I'm not even sure I make the sixth myself. Not right now. But at least," he went on, brightening up a little, "I know where to find it; I know where it lies. I know how to get back and I will get back."

"Why don't you tell them?"

"Tell them what?"

"Where to find it. How to get back. . . . I have to go now," I said as politely as I could, but firmly.

"I *will* tell them, Cherry! God bless you, my child. I shall never forget this talk. If ever I can be of any help to you, do not hesitate to come to me."

I was as embarrassed as the dickens. He sounded like another fanatic to me. I was glad to break away. I hurried on over to Junie's. Artie and Bob were there and after a while I got it out of my mind.

I went home early to allow plenty of time to get ready for Mrs. Delafield's party. I hadn't asked any of the small fry to go with me, though Doris wanted me to. I figured half the fun of going would be spreading the news on Monday morning that I, alone of our crowd, had been to one of Mrs. Delafield's little suppers.

## V

THE PARTY was all I expected and more. For anybody who had never had a home and never stayed in one place long enough to settle down and make friends, Mrs. Delafield did a wonderful job. I noticed that she had a huge stack of magazines on homes and children and mothers so perhaps she had picked up a few hints from them. I looked for pictures of her son but there was none in sight.

Because I was the kid in the crowd she was particularly attentive to me. "You all know my little friend Cherry," she said, "Dorry's sister." Of course they all did. "Cherry and I are going to be the guests of honor tonight. We shall sit in the best chairs and be waited on and we expect the largest portions of everything."

She had put the food out on the kitchen table and as soon as guests came in she set them to work. They broiled chicken (no points) in the fireplace. They baked potatoes in the ashes. They made salad and set up trays and dripped coffee.

It was slick and they loved it.

I was sitting there with Mrs. Delafield, waiting to be served, when maybe my conscience began to hurt, for I found myself saying, "Mrs. Delafield, I'm very sorry, but that day you came to our house to see Mother I heard every word you said. I had left the door open on purpose but if I'd known what I was going to hear I'd have gone down cellar or up in the attic and stuffed pillows in my ears. Once I got in there I couldn't get out. So I heard everything."

"I know, darling. I'm very observing. I noticed that you left the door open but I didn't care."

"You knew I was sitting out there eavesdropping?"

"Yes, darling. But my heart was so full and I needed your mother so much—maybe I needed you, too, without knowing it! Yes, I think I did."

"Mother's right," I whispered. "You're one in a million."

"Cherry—" she was whispering too—"I do need you. Your mother

showed me some of Larry's letters, and I see what a difference there is between him and Steve. I think a kid sister is what Steve needs. Will you be his kid sister, Cherry? He was cheated out of so many good things and I can't give him one of his own now. But you would be a perfect stand-in. Will you?"

I was so startled I couldn't say a word. I'm not sure I could even breathe. I slipped my fingers under her hand to show my heart was in the right place and she squeezed them. We didn't say anything more because they all came trooping noisily in with the food. For once in my life I didn't feel hungry but I was not asleep at the switch. I looked that crowd over appraisingly. It wasn't a large crowd but of what was left in Morrisville it was the tops, the definite, unquestionable tops—except for me. A few of them I didn't care much about but I suppose a few of them did not care much about me, either.

Doris told me later that for her first party Mrs. Delafield had invited everyone on the list that Emalie, the banker's daughter, had given her but had begun cutting down and weeding out immediately. What she had on the Sunday night I was there was the cream of the skimmed milk the war and war work had left. Their ages ranged from Dorry's eighteen up to twenty-three or four because when the older high school girls took war jobs they had been garnered into the regular town crowd.

After supper, while the others carried the dishes out and washed them and put them away—and no arguments from the girls about saving their manicures, either—Mrs. Delafield took me upstairs to show me the house. It was lovely. In her room was a big photograph of her son Steve. I looked at it a long time. I said he was very good-looking.

"As good-looking as Larry?" she asked smiling.

"I don't think so. Maybe not quite. But good-looking enough. Larry takes after Mother; he was always voted the best-looking boy in everything."

"Steve looks very nice in his uniform," she said.

"It's a stunning uniform. Is he an officer?"

"Yes, he's a captain. He flies a fighter plane, you know. . . . Come on down the hall. These are his rooms."

The doors were closed on his rooms but we went in and she turned on the lights. They were lovely rooms, a bedroom and a sitting room with his own bath.

"I went to no end of trouble digging up things he used years ago. They were packed and stored away all over the country but I want him to have familiar things to come home to."

She opened the closet door. His civilian clothes, very nice, were neatly hung. Everything in both rooms was a man's—brushes, shaving equipment, tie racks—everything for a man. There were his books, some small toys from childhood, fishing rods, golf clubs, a rifle. There was a nasty lump in my throat so I couldn't say anything.

"I don't think you'll find it hard being a kid sister to him, Cherry. He's a very swell person—and I cheated him all his life."

"Maybe he won't like me," I said huskily.

"Who doesn't?" she asked, a nice thing to say. "Cherry, even in birth we have no choice, we can't select members of our families in advance. We take what comes to us. Sometimes there's warm companionship in a family, like yours. Sometimes there's antagonism, jealousy, even outright enmity. But we always try to make it work. Will you help me try to make this work?"

I nodded my head. I hadn't the faintest idea what she expected of me or what I was letting myself in for, but I knew I would try to do what she wanted.

When we went downstairs and the crowd made a move toward the radio and the game room, Mrs. Delafield said, "No, not tonight, dears. I want you to come and sit by me. I have a personal, private, sacred secret I want to share with you. I have been saving it. I want your advice and I need your help."

She told them about her son. Not the way she had told Mother. She did not want their pity and she did not need them in that deep way she had needed Mother. But she told about him and passed his pictures around. They were surprised and excited and asked eager questions about him. They were flattered, too, I could see that, because she had chosen our town for his home and them to be his friends. When Doris looked my way I tried to appear as surprised as the rest of them but she was not thinking about me.

"We haven't much time to work on this," Mrs. Delafield said

cheerfully. "He's due home almost any time. Every time the doorbell or the phone rings I think, 'It might be Steve!' He will be different when he comes. Not so boyish. It's a man's job he's been doing. I am prepared for that. But I want him to come home to friendship and interest—respect, too. I want a place where he can be happy while making the hard adjustments after the war. Even when he goes away to take up some lifework somewhere, I want him to feel he has a home here and friends who like him."

She did it magnificently. She answered all their questions and read excerpts from his letters, newsy or amusing parts, about his flying missions and English girls and "limeys." She skipped the paragraphs about religion and home. They were in such a hurry to begin being friends they could hardly wait for him to get his leave.

I usually speak out of turn unless Dad or Doris gives me a look, and Doris was studying one of the photographs attentively and had forgotten all about me. And the first thing I knew I was saying, "Why don't you begin tonight? Why don't you write him a round robin and tell him how you've messed up the tidy fireplace with chicken and spattered grease and how you broke one of the best coffee cups and that you like his looks—"

They leaped at the idea. Mrs. Delafield, who had hold of my hand again, lifted it to her lips and gently bit the tips of my fingers. "Kid sister to the king's taste," she said.

She cleared off the dining-room table, got paper, pens and ink and they scribbled little notes to him, one after the other. When they finished they took turns reading them aloud. Most of them were funny, some much funnier than others, for some people haven't a shred of humor. Mrs. Delafield laughed until there were tears in her eyes and said she hadn't been so happy in years. Then she told them to run into the living room and have a dance or two while she addressed the envelope to get it posted as soon as possible. When they had gone, she shoved the paper toward me.

"Now, Cherry."

I was appalled. I looked at the paper. I bit the pen and got ink on my lips. Usually I am quite humorous but I thought and thought, and I couldn't think of anything to say.

"You needn't be formal," she said encouragingly. "Just tell him I

have commandeered you as our Junior Miss from this point on and we are taking you for better or worse."

"It'll be worse," I warned her. Then I wrote very fast.

"I am the postscript. I don't belong in this crowd but I am on my toes as a runner-upper. I am the Number One Kid Sister of North Ireland and can take Great Britain in my stride without batting an eye. If you happen to lose sight of your target some time and have to make a forced landing not far from Belfast, you will hear some choice Irish versions of the untoward adventures of a boss-ridden squirt who means right but turns out wrong. They will be traceable to Cherry."

I was enchanted with the whole evening. I told Mother it would probably go ringing down the corridors of my life as an outstanding epoch.

There were other things about that day that did not ring so pleasantly. I had not heard the last of my unfortunate encounter with Dr. Gayne.

When I got home from school Monday afternoon, Mother hung around me with an air of uneasy solicitude and kept asking odd, leading questions that didn't lead anywhere. I told her I felt fine and was in perfect health but she kept it up all evening, watching me, as you might say, with bated breath. But I didn't do any breath-bating.

Dad and Doris noticed it and as soon as they could get me off alone and asked indignantly what I had been up to. I hadn't been up to anything. They wanted to know what we had been talking about but we hadn't talked about anything.

It was not that starry, brittle look that had frightened us so much but she kept following me around, gazing at me with a mellow, moony look and everything she said was with a rising inflection as if she were asking a question. I thought maybe Mrs. Delafield had said something about me, but she said Gorge had taken a great fancy to me and wished I belonged to her.

But she kept right at it. It got on my nerves like nobody's business. I began to think maybe I was sick after all. Father was fit to be tied. He said I couldn't fool him, he knew when I had been up to something and if he caught me at any funny business he would turn me

over his knee if I was as big as Goliath. He said he had already warned me a dozen times that any careless remark was apt to set her off. But I hadn't made any remarks and I didn't intend to. We lived along in that kind of a calf-eyed daze until Wednesday.

When I took my books to the farthest corner of the sun porch to get as far away from her as possible, she followed me out and pulled a chair up near me, still moony-eyed and lifted up, and said, "Will you let your lessons go for a while, dear? I want to talk to you."

It was the last thing on earth I wanted but what could I do? I was scared stiff. I thought it was probably some new kind of attack but she did not look violent.

"Cherry," she said, "are you finding any solace—in religion?"

I was knocked right off my feet but I remembered that we had to humor her.

"Well, not definitely," I said carefully. "No, not definitely. I say my prayers very regularly now and I pray hard. But I can't say I find any—special—solace."

"Are you groping for it, Cherry? Are you knocking, so a door will be opened? Are you seeking, hoping to find?"

I really was in a spot. "Not exactly, Mother, I can't say that exactly. I think you and Father are probably right and that now when we are all so keyed up and worried and not like ourselves we . . . really should . . . say our prayers and go to church and such things, and maybe we'd feel better. But I can't say that I feel any better myself. I felt all right to begin with."

"Then why did you go to see Dr. Gayne?"

"I didn't go to see Dr. Gayne! He's the last person on earth I'd go to see! Why should I go to see him?"

"He telephoned me, Cherry, and said he had had an illuminating and inspiring talk with you and he was sure you were—on the threshold."

I saw through it in a flash! "That dumb cluck!" I said explosively. "The only talk I had with him was when he cornered me on the public street and I was too polite to cut and run for it."

"Oh," she said flatly. "I'm sorry. I thought maybe in some of God's mysterious ways you really had—got hold of something. I thought maybe you could help me—help Gorge and me."

I could have wrung the old nitwit's neck but I remembered Mother's condition and retained as much calmness as possible. "What did the old windbag say, Mother?"

"Just what I told you. That he had had an illuminating and inspiring talk with you and found you surprisingly pointed in things of the spirit. He suggested that we be very considerate and sympathetic, for he was sure you were on the threshold of a deep spiritual experience if indeed you had not already attained it. He said you inspired him, Cherry. Why should he say that?"

"Because he's nuts, Mother, plain and unadulterated nuts. That's why! I didn't inspire him worth a cent. I knocked him in the gutter, if you ask me."

"You—what?"

"Oh, just figuratively, Mother," I added hastily. "I just asked politely why didn't he preach about God for a change and why, instead of praying for those in high places, he didn't pray for some of us in low places who need it like the very old Nick? That's all, Mother. That's absolutely all, I give you my word. The old buzzard must have looked up synonyms and translated me into some foreign language."

Mother smiled but she looked sad. "I'm sorry, Cherry. I was so hoping you had found something. I wish somebody could find something. We have never needed it so much."

I didn't say anything. What could I say? But I made up my mind it was the last cent the old double-crosser would ever get out of my allowance. If Mother and Dad wanted to go on contributing for such tripe it was their business, but I was fed up. I had told him in plain, unmistakable English that I was not interested in religion and then he had sneaked up and knifed me in the back with this. And upsetting Mother, too! In her state of mind!

"What did he mean, Cherry—that you had given him new inspiration?"

"Mother," I said, weighing every syllable, knowing I would catch it from Dad if I didn't watch my step, "don't you think maybe he's a little crazy? He told me he knew how to get back to God and all I said was why didn't he tell the congregation how to do it? He's just nuts! Maybe it's the war but he sounds plain nuts to me."

It shows the state of mind we and the world were in, when you couldn't even trust your own minister. For the time being, the misunderstanding made things pretty soft for me, but screwy, definitely screwy. If things had been normal I could have had some nice pickings out of it but as it was I had no heart for it. Mother got Dad and Doris off on the side and told them to go easy with me; I was seeking religion and Dr. Gayne had said it was important that I be dealt with generously and with sympathy. I don't know whether they put any stock in it or were determinedly humoring Mother, as I was, but for a few days the whole family was wall-eyed over me. If I opened my mouth to make any casual remark everybody stopped short, forks poised in mid-air and whatnot, and the shock of it banished any pearls of wisdom I might have had ready to chuck at them.

I knew that some people, mostly rather old, went around seeking religion and I knew Mother and Mrs. Delafield were hot on the trail. That was all right for them; it wouldn't do parents a bit of harm to have a little religion. I took no stock in it myself. I had told Dr. Gayne where I stood in words of one syllable and here I was, stuck up like some budding Joan of Arc. Poor kid! I had always rather envied her, with that slick white uniform and sword and big charger, riding around with all those kings and French soldiers. Now I realized what she had run up against.

I was almost ashamed to go to the movie with Artie that week, because I knew everybody was thinking I ought to be upstairs seeking religion instead of skipping down the primrose path of movies and ice-cream sodas with worldly boys like Artie. I went though.

We struggled along till Sunday.

When Mother came up with "Time to be up if you're going to Sunday school," it was Doris who bounded out of bed. I buried my head in the pillows and muttered, "I'm not going. I want to sleep."

"You—are—not—going?"

I snored faintly. Mother tiptoed down the hall.

"Cherry isn't going to Sunday school," she whispered to Dad.

"What's that?" he sputtered. "What's that you say?"

"Don't say a word! Maybe she's too far advanced for Sunday school. Don't mention it!"

As soon as she was safely downstairs, Father charged into my

room. He was at his most apoplectic. "What do you mean, upsetting your mother again? You get out of that bed and get yourself off to Sunday school. You can seek religion all you want to, but you're not going to upset your mother. Get out of that bed and beat it!"

Poor Joan! I'll bet the poor girl was driven to it by some kindly nut in the family or some doddering old preacher who couldn't understand plain English!

I went to Sunday school and afterward Doris and I waited in the vestibule for Mother and Dad. They were chatting pleasantly with different people and when I got a chance—I had to say it; I felt I just couldn't face Dr. Gayne—I said, "Mother, do you mind if I do not stay for church this morning?"

"Of course not, darling," she said in her mooniest voice. "Run right along. You will have a nice quiet hour by yourself for—for meditation."

I didn't argue. I started to light out for home, but no soap. Dad saw me. "Cherry! Where are you going? What's up now?"

"Mother said I needn't stay for church this morning. I'm going home."

"Cherry," he said, gritting his teeth, "you are doing your damnedest to upset her. You beat it into that church and no more nonsense!"

I wanted to tell him I was going home to meditate but I hadn't the gall. So I went to church.

I must say for Dr. Gayne that he didn't hold me up as a horrible example, which I had feared. And though I had reached the spot where I couldn't bear the man, I admit that he prayed for us instead of those in high places. And he actually preached about God. I was thinking about other things and didn't follow closely but he brought in God quite a good deal.

Afterward, when Mother and Gorge were comparing notes, and I was carefully listening, Mother said, "Gorge, I think he had something this morning! I think I got something out of it!"

"I thought so too, Helen," Gorge whispered. "Maybe he has something to give us after all."

Dr. Gayne was shaking hands at the door as we went out. I was trembling in my best clothes. I tried to give him the slip but he got

hold of me and took my hand in both of his. I was hot and goose-pimply at the same time.

"Did I do any better today, Cherry?" he asked softly.

"Y-yes, it was better," I said, looking everywhere in the vestibule but at him. "I think maybe—you've really—got something to give us."

It was copycat, pure and simple, but I couldn't think of anything else and had to say something.

"Thank you, Cherry. You're an inspiration!"

As we were walking home, Doris with Mother and I with Dad, I could see Dad giving me odd, quizzical looks out of the corner of his eye. I didn't say a word.

Finally he broke down. "Cherry, what was Dr. Gayne driving at when he said you had given him new inspiration?"

"I haven't the faintest idea! You know what dumb clucks preachers are!" I said evasively.

"Yes, I know. But let me tell you this, young lady. If you do anything else to upset your mother, I'll turn you over my knee and spank the daylights out of you, yes, even if you are St. Cecelia in disguise. I must say I can't think of a more perfect disguise for a saint to rig herself out in."

It gradually wore off. Since I didn't begin sprouting wings before their eyes and got into as many scrapes as before—except for upsetting Mother—they decided that my halo, if any, was tarnished and I was going to remain human a while longer. Mother was watching the mails so eagerly, wanting an answer from Larry, that she forgot she had been mistakenly setting the stage for some sort of ambiguous prophet in the household.

We agreed that it was a very odd thing about overseas mail. Father blamed it on the inefficiency of the Administration, but, remembering Mother, he did it cheerfully and without groaning.

All the months Larry had been in training we had heard from him regularly, sometimes two or three times a week. Now, with Mother and Gorge almost holding their breath in their anxiety to hear, no letters came.

In November, when it was announced that the Americans had

landed in North Africa, we were excited and thrilled like everybody else and for a while we avoided saying what we were all thinking. Father mentioned it first, speaking carefully and with pronounced calm. "Larry was probably in it. That's why we haven't heard."

Every morning we raced for the paper to read the headlines about North Africa. We spent hours hanging over the radio for the news broadcasts. It was just before Christmas that we got our first letter headed "Somewhere in North Africa." It didn't say much—that it had been quite a show they had staged there and were still staging; that Casablanca wasn't much of a city as far as he could see; that so far he was intact and unscathed. He gave us his new APO number and begged us to rush along the mail and send him some magazines.

In February the letter she was waiting for finally arrived. She did not as usual put it among the stack of mail on the tray on the hall table for us to dash through. She didn't mention it till we had finished dinner.

Then she stood up as if she were making a formal introduction. She said, "I had a letter from Larry today. I want you to read it. Be careful not to lose any of the little pages. I want Gorge to see it. It is in answer to some questions I asked."

She put the letter on the table and went upstairs.

## VI

### Somewhere in North Africa

"Dear Inquisitive Mother:

"We have been shoved up a couple of times and it wasn't until yesterday that the mail was forwarded through to us from England. You would have thought it was a riot! I haven't finished reading my share yet. Your letter was in it so here goes.

"Gosh, Mother, the Government would be ashamed of you. Couldn't you think of any other questions? It was the stingiest questionnaire I've tackled yet. The Big Boys beat you all holler when it

comes to nosing into our private lives. You didn't even ask if I smoke too much, how freely I imbibe of the African *vino*, what I think of French and pseudo-French gals, whether I am low enough to snitch a buddy's last bottle of coke and what are my emotional reactions to the antimalaria shots?

"All right, Beloved, you asked for it. Here it is.

"Do I pray? Gosh, yes. You bet you my life I pray. Maybe I'm not strictly orthodox in my vocabulary but when the alert comes and we dive into our fox holes, if there's anybody in our outfit who isn't asking God to stick around, I don't know who it is.

"Am I religious? No, I don't think so. At least, I never thought of it that way. It's an odd thing, though, Mother. Maybe you won't understand it. I can't say I understand it myself. But a lot of things that I learned as a kid and never thought much about, all of a sudden over here began to make sense. Not much, maybe, but some.

"You remember that phrase—what's the first book in the Bible? Genesis? Yes, Genesis. You remember it says, 'God moved on the face of the waters.' It never meant a thing. I suppose I had some cloudy impression of a big white person with wings sort of floating over the sea. The desert is a strange place, Mother. Sometimes it looks like water. Sometimes in the morning or the evening (the evenings are very short here), and sometimes right in the middle of the day, when you look out over the sand, the air seems to be moving. Maybe it's the heat. But you can see, or think you see, something drifting, not really drifting, more like swaying, just moving. Every time I see it I think, 'God moving on the face of the desert.' If you look long enough you almost get the feeling that you are part of it, moving with it, wrapped up in it.

"Things come back like that.

"And you remember we were taught that God is everywhere, in everything, permeating all things, air, water, earth, rocks, sticks and stones. Permeating us, too. It was like another nebular hypothesis to me then. There were so many trees and flowers and houses and shrubs and homes!

"Over here, there aren't many trees, there aren't many houses. Just camouflaged camps and fox holes. When we come up to a grove of

palm trees they look so heavenly you can't help thinking, 'God is there. God is in those trees. God is those trees.'

"Sounds nutty, doesn't it?

"Sometimes we are in the fox holes a long time, waiting. Planes zooming over. Bombs dropping somewhere. The earth trembling. Sometimes there is a scream. You look up—the sky seems very black and very close on the desert; the stars look warm; they seem close, too. Planes streak across the sky and the stars wink out behind them as they pass and as you look up you can't help thinking, 'God is there. God is in that air. God is in that devilish plane and in that devilish pilot. He is even in those hellish bombs.' And you think—your thoughts sort of gallop at those times—you think, if God is in that air, why doesn't He just close in and crush that plane to splinters? All He'd have to do would be close in. You think if you were God and could, you would. You can't help wondering why He doesn't.

"But when you get back to bed again and think it over, you kind of reason it out. That isn't His job; it's yours. His job seems to be mostly—well, just sticking around, seeing it through. And believe me, you are damned glad He is.

"When we're sent up to take a place, or try to, I don't know that I really pray, Mother. But I think. Maybe this sounds irreverent but I don't mean it that way. What I really think, if I think at all, is—'Well, here we go, God. Don't forget to stick around.' Not in those words exactly; not in any words. But I know this: when the action is over, whether we take the place or get shoved back, when it is over my first thought is always 'Thanks.' Maybe it's prayer.

"When you're on a chore, right at it, you don't really think at all. I don't anyhow. You've got your orders and you take them. Maybe the Brass Hats have miscalculated, and things go haywire. That's not my business. It's theirs, the Brass Hats'.

"I think maybe that's how I feel about God. He's got His job and it's none of my business.

"When a particularly nasty chore is over and you drop off to sleep like a log, dead tired and heartsick, with maybe half your best pals lying back off there somewhere, you half mumble, half think—or maybe it's prayer, 'Okay, Okay.'

"When you really think, and it's not often, you sort of figure there must be a plan in it somewhere, maybe His plan, you wouldn't know. But you figure that somebody's got to use your legs to march on, use your hands to man a gun, maybe use your blood to stop a gap somewhere and I'm darned glad I learned as a kid—and didn't know what I was learning and it didn't mean a thing to me then—but I'm darned glad it soaked into me—or was socked in—that God's in His heaven and that even though we've managed to mess it up a good deal, it's still His world.

"Is that religious? I don't feel religious. But you can take it from me that what I used to consider all that Sunday-school tripe that was rammed down our throats, begins to make sense when you're alone in a fox hole with Messerschmitts blacking out the stars and only God between you and the next bomb. Gosh, maybe I have got religion after all and don't know it.

"No, Mother, I can't say that I feel God. Most of the time I don't feel anything but dog-tired. But you feel something. Bigness, strangeness, silence. You feel alone and yet covered up, if you know what I mean. You feel little and yet important. You feel—well, mystery. I guess mystery is the word. In bed, awake and yet half asleep, you feel mystery swimming around you. Down in a fox hole scared, but not scared enough not to realize you are damned uncomfortable and to wish the merry hell would get it over with, you feel mystery. I'm not sure that's the right word. Send me a dictionary, will you?

"You feel something that is exciting and yet comforting. You feel something you don't understand but you're glad you feel it. Is that God? I wouldn't know, Mother. But I'm glad it's there.

"Anything else? Gosh, Mother, it turned out to be more of a questionnaire than I figured it. The Government asks more questions but times them to snappy answers, 'Check yes or no.'

"I have to go now. A bunch of us heard there was a hidden harem off in the distance somewhere and we're on a still hunt for it.

"Love,

"Larry."

## VII

MOTHER HAD given her middle-aged luncheon for Mrs. Delafield according to schedule. Rather meanly, I thought, she did it on a school day so I couldn't be around in the offing to keep a polite eye and ear on the proceedings. When I got in after school the guests were still there and they were all billing and cooing over Mrs. Delafield as if she were the pet of the county. Like Mother, they had been so surprised when she began cultivating the young crowd they hadn't even bothered to call on her, and you couldn't blame them, but evidently she had quite won them over and by the time they left, I felt sorry for her poor son, because the whole town was pledged to be a mother to him and one mother can be pretty hard to handle.

None of us had put addresses on that round-robin letter, so he sent to his mother his answer to what he called his "gang by adoption." He wrote a separate letter to me and sent it also by her. I don't know whether she had put him up to paying me this particular attention or whether he figured out himself that since I was an outsider and an interloper in Dorry's crowd I needed special encouragement.

His letter to me was nice enough. He said having a kid sister was such a new and exciting experience that he didn't know just what was expected of him but he had been making inquiries and had learned that getting into scrapes was the divine forte of kid sisters and he hoped I would live up to my end of the agreement. He asked what I would like as a souvenir but please not to ask for Hitler's mustache because he understood it had already been promised to so many girls that they couldn't possibly rate more than half a hair apiece and he was sure I was too fastidious to be satisfied with half a Hitler hair.

So everything went along all right for a while. Mrs. Delafield had the young crowd, Steve's crowd by adoption, in about once a month for Sunday night supper. She did not invite me to any more of the parties but she had me for dinner alone with her a few times. She was

at our house a lot, too, for she and Mother were thick as peas and since the mothers of Morrisville had taken her to their united bosom she was pretty busy.

We didn't hear from Larry again for a long time. We were all reasonable and philosophical about it. We reminded ourselves and each other that we couldn't expect the mails to be as regular from North Africa, which was so much larger. At first, as soon as any of us reached home, our first inquiry was, "Anything from Larry?" But there wasn't anything for so long that we quit asking. It was in all our minds, of course, and was the one thing we wanted to know but we could see that Mother was upset. She was pale. Her eyes were too bright and she smiled too much. But it wasn't a smiling smile. None of our smiles were really smiling.

We struggled along somehow until the first week of March. When I got in from school I ran through the mail on the tray on the hall table but there was nothing from Larry. I was standing there, just looking at the stack of mail—with nothing in it!—when Mother came downstairs, walking swiftly, heels clicking.

"There was word about Larry," she said, sounding very much out of breath. "It was from the War Department, Cherry. He is missing in action."

"He isn't killed then," I said. My voice didn't sound like mine, not even to me; I sounded like somebody else. "If he had been killed they would know it."

"Yes, that's what I think," she said.

"They would *certainly* know if he had been killed!" I said. "They would have the dog tag and his uniform. Maybe he was wounded and some kind Arabs took him away to nurse him. I've read about cases like that."

"Yes. Or maybe he was taken prisoner."

I took off my wraps and hung them in the hall closet. "The Nazis treat their prisoners better than the Japs," I said. "I'm glad he was there—instead of there."

"Yes, so am I. Very glad."

But we didn't feel glad. We felt terrible. Larry . . . I can't tell you how nice Larry was. I reminded myself that all families felt about their sons just as we did about Larry. But I was sure not many

of them were as nice as he. I knew lots of boys, Dorry's friends and mine too, but not one of them was as all-around nice as Larry. And it wasn't just because he was my brother. Everybody loved him.

I took my books and sat down but I couldn't study. I didn't try to. I kept trying to remember everything I had ever heard about how the Germans treated their prisoners. And from the bottom of my heart, I thanked God Larry wasn't a Jew. I didn't have a thing against Jews, myself. Not a thing! There were three in my class at school and they were as nice as everybody else. And Mr. Gotter-schmidt, the delicatessen man, though a little hard to understand was as polite and pleasant as could be.

I couldn't help thinking, "Jesus was a Jew." And then I thanked God that Jesus had never been a prisoner in Germany.

I was so sick at heart I couldn't even think straight. But I remember saying over and over to myself, "After all the ghastly things they did to Jesus, it wasn't as bad as being a Jew in Germany."

Father was late that night and Doris got in ahead of him. Mother told her, in exactly the same words she had told me. Doris burst out crying.

"Don't cry, Dorry," Mother said. "Remember, he isn't killed. If he had been killed they would know it. He wouldn't be reported—just missing."

They were my own words. But Doris kept on crying.

"And if he was taken prisoner," Mother went on, "remember the Germans treat their prisoners much better than the Japs. We must be glad he was there instead of in the Pacific."

Doris didn't say a word. She ran upstairs, crying bitterly.

Dad came next and I had to hear it again. "Missing in action. Missing in action."

Dad dropped into a chair heavily. Doris ran downstairs, still crying, and flung herself into his lap. I stood up. I felt sick all over.

Dad hadn't said a word. He reached out his hand toward Mother and she put the telegram in his hand. It took him a long time to read it—such a short message: "Regret to report . . . missing in action."

Mother went to the kitchen and began preparing dinner. I set the table. We only made pretense of eating. On the way home from school I had told Junie I was ravenous and planned the raid I was go-

ing to make on the icebox. But a thing like that fills you up too full for food. We tried to talk. We went over it all again, how it was better being a prisoner in Germany than in Japan and that we could be quite sure he had not been killed or they would have had proof. And we went into particular detail about the cases we had heard of kind Arabs spiriting wounded men away and nursing them back to health.

It was my night for the movies but I called Artie up and canceled the date. I couldn't bear to be away from the house. There might be more news, better news.

We stayed together, the four of us in the living room. We listened to every broadcast that came over the air, listened breathlessly when they spoke of the action in North Africa.

When the telephone rang suddenly we all stood up and looked at it but for the first time on record the rest of us stood stock-still and Dad answered it. It was Mr. Andrews, the editor of the *Morning News*. He said he had received the report from AP and hoped it was in error and there was no confirmation. Dad confirmed it briefly. Mr. Andrews said he was sorry and hoped and prayed for the best. Dad thanked him. Nothing else.

Nobody mentioned bedtime at ten o'clock and we sat up together until midnight, waiting, just waiting; not knowing what we were waiting for; listening intently all the time but hearing only silence.

"Missing in action—"

Mother looked sick at breakfast. We were all washed-out and wan but she looked really ill. Her eyes had that unnatural, shiny brightness again and her voice was high-pitched and brittle.

"Helen," Dad said with studied calmness, "we're all keyed up and nervous over this thing and we can't help it. We've got to make out the best we can. Suppose I take the day off from the office. Let's take the car and go somewhere in the country and spend the day. Let's take the girls, too. It won't hurt them to miss school. It will get our minds off things . . . going places . . . seeing people . . ."

"No," Mother said. "I have to be here. There might be some word."

"Helen," Dad said, and I thought he was being very nice about it, his voice was so gentle and sad, "it's apt to be weeks before we hear

anything. The chances are that he is a prisoner and is being taken to Germany or some occupied country. It may be weeks before we hear. We can't just sit here and wait."

"I have to," Mother said. "It might come—and I wouldn't be here. I have to . . . sit here and wait."

Father went to the telephone and called his office. I never dreamed he could have been so swell in such a crisis. He told his secretary he was taking the day off and not to bother him about anything—business could wait.

"Okay, then, Helen," he said. "I've got the day off. Now fish out all those lousy jobs you've been holding over my head for the last ten years. Loose knobs, sticky drawers, sagging doors, busted screens—fish them out. And fish out the tools, too. If we've got to sit here and wait we may as well hammer a nail or two to pass away the time."

Mother smiled—or almost smiled. Oh, so sad it was, just a faint upturn of one corner of her lips and a downturn of the other.

"That's fine, Dad. You'll be surprised at the odd jobs I have up my sleeve for you. By the way, Cherry, go call up the *News*. They didn't leave our paper this morning."

"There's never anything in it, anyhow," I said. "We can get the news over the radio."

I had a premonition or something. I sleep lightly and hear about everything that goes on and I had heard Dad creaking softly downstairs at daybreak. If he had snatched that paper I wasn't going to give him away.

"Mother, do we have to go to school today?" Doris pleaded. "Can't we stay home and hold the hammer and pass Dad the nails? You know how he always misplaces things and sits on them and—"

"Certainly not. He has a whole day to chase the hammer."

"Mother," Doris said, "if you hear anything, will you call us up? Call us right out of our classes and tell us?"

"My darlings, if there is any news I'll call you instantly. I'll come myself and tell you! I can't think of a more blessed way to spend a coupon."

When they had all gone off about different things, I had a quick look for the paper. It was under the cushion in the wing chair. There

was a big picture of Larry on the front page. A picture of Larry in his uniform and the caption was "Missing in Action."

In spite of the terrible things that happen, life has to go right on. It seems silly and it seems cruel but that's the way it is. Mother had to go on keeping house and preparing our meals. Father had to go back to his job at the office. Doris and I had to keep on at school.

To me, it got to seem a ridiculous and useless routine, the whole business of living. Get up and dress; eat breakfast and go to school; come home and do your homework; eat dinner, listen to the radio or see a movie; go to bed.

Larry had done all those things, too. Got up and dressed; eaten breakfast and gone to school; had dates and dances and movies and now—"missing in action." If a thing like that could happen to Larry, any kind of thing could happen to anybody. Insane, it was insane, going ahead, following a certain pattern when any minute you could be stopped dead in your tracks, your plans cut short.

But we went on, day after day.

We were at dinner on the fifth night—I think it was the fifth. Mother was pale. The silver was showing clearly again through the gold-bronze of her hair. We had been quiet, we were nearly always quiet, there seemed absolutely nothing worth talking about. If anyone so much as remarked it had been a pleasant day, we all leaped at it and agreed that it had been a *very* pleasant day, and went into raptures over it until finally the subject dropped dead of sheer exhaustion.

Suddenly Mother broke in: "Has it ever occurred to you that we are a completely godless family?" We were shocked, but we didn't forget that we had to humor her. "Heathens, infidels, atheists—they are better than we are. We know there is a God and we just wash our hands of Him. Like Pilate."

"I offered to ask the blessing, Helen, and you didn't want it." Father's voice sounded very tired.

"Words, words, words! Of course I don't want words! I want something to believe in, something to hold onto, something to trust! I want—" She shook her head drearily. "Oh, I suppose we can't help it. It's probably my fault."

"I don't think you're quite fair, Helen, either to yourself or to us," Dad said carefully. "We're upset. We can't help being upset. We're not normal. This . . . uncertainty . . . that hangs over us day and night, it's abnormal. We're not ourselves, we can't be ourselves."

"But if we had any faith, any real faith, we wouldn't have that uncertainty. We'd have something to hold onto. We could say, 'Thy will be done,' and mean it. I say it myself. I say it a thousand times a day. 'Not my will but thine'—but I don't mean it. I don't mean a word of it. I want Larry."

"You can't say I don't pray, Mother," I said. "I pray hours and hours. I lie awake half the night praying about Larry."

"But do you feel anything? Do you have any sense that your prayers are getting anywhere? Or do you just say words over and over—like the Pharisees?"

"I don't stand on the street corners," I said defensively. "I do it in my own room and in my own bed. And if there is a God, He has to hear me, doesn't He?"

"'If there is a God.' Did you hear that, Dad? 'If there is a God.' We were taught that God is; not 'if there is.'" She shook her head again. "I'm sorry. Forget it. I know I am nervous and upset. Let it go."

But you can't let a thing like that go. You can't forget it. Personally I thought Mother was letting her nerves run away with her. We were as religious as anybody else in our set. I remembered that Dr. Gayne had said there were only four real Christians in our church and wasn't even sure of himself. But we all went to church and were certainly as respectable as anybody else. Nothing really wicked ever happened among the people we knew. There were some robberies going on in town, and some drunken fights and bad automobile accidents because of intoxication; and there had been a couple of killings. But not in our part of town, not among the people we knew.

As far as I could see we had all the religion we needed. But you couldn't help thinking about it; you couldn't let it go like that.

Father got Doris and me aside and told us fiercely that we had to quit upsetting Mother. But we were already trying our hardest not to upset her. He said we had to act more religious. But we didn't know how to act religious. We tried going around the house very

solemn and quiet as if our minds were on higher things but that got on her nerves until she almost had hysterics.

I was sure if we could just get some news from Larry she would be all right. In some way, and I partly blamed Mrs. Delafield for it, she had Larry all mixed up in her mind with religion. I listened to the sermons at church very attentively. Mother and Mrs. Delafield agreed that Dr. Gayne really was "giving them something," but I didn't get any very religious feeling about it; just what you usually feel in church, kind of hushed and bored and a little sleepy.

We suffered along for a full month without any word at all from Larry. Then a terrible thing happened—happened suddenly, out of a clear sky, as terrible things always happen.

Doris was late getting down to breakfast one morning and when she came in, running, she stood up behind her chair and said excitedly, "Oh, Mother! The most wonderful thing! I got converted last night!"

Mother and Dad just looked at her. I looked at her too. She was bright-eyed and smiling.

"You couldn't!" I said. "You didn't go any place. You weren't out of the house all evening. There wasn't anybody to convert you!"

"There was God, wasn't there?" She smiled so broadly it was almost like laughter.

She dropped down into her chair. "It's so simple, Mother, when it really happens. I was amazed. I thought it was going to be hard."

"What happened, Doris?" Dad asked, his voice as sepulchral as if we were discussing taxes again.

"I've been trying very hard," Doris said brightly. "I've been looking through the Bible trying to find a clue. I was sure it must tell you how somewhere but I couldn't seem to put my finger on anything. But last night I remembered about Jacob wrestling with the spirit all night and I said to myself, 'All right, then, I'll wrestle all night, too, and if it makes a cripple of me I don't care.' "

"Did it make a cripple of you?" I asked.

"Not at all. Didn't you hear me run downstairs? I never felt so well in my life. I feel perfect."

"What happened, Doris?" Dad asked again.

"I thought of what Larry said in his letter about God moving on

the desert. Maybe I got a little sleepy, I don't know. But I seemed to be moving, too, I seemed to be part of It. I seemed to be all wrapped up in It, not myself, not separate, just part of It. And suddenly there was the greatest stillness. And I was part of the stillness, too. I remembered that line, 'Be still and know that I am God,' and I thought, 'Why, This is God. I am a little atom in God.' It was a wonderful feeling, Mother, so quiet, so safe, so sure. And I knew Larry was all right and we mustn't worry about him any more."

"You mean . . . he is . . . not dead?" Mother asked. Her lips were white.

"I don't know about that, Mother. But I know he is all right, wherever he is. He's all right and we mustn't worry. May I ask the blessing, Mother? It won't be just words. I am grateful from the bottom of my heart."

The rest of us were already half through breakfast but we bowed our heads and Doris said, "God, we do thank You. We thank You from the bottoms of our hearts. For everything we thank You, but especially because we know You are with Larry and he's all right. Amen."

She smiled around the table at us and began sipping her orange juice. Mother kept her eyes on her plate. Dad looked as if he were on the verge of a stroke again. My breakfast was ruined; I couldn't eat a bite. I felt terrible.

Doris was a grand girl and a swell sister and she had enough religion for eighteen years old. It was all right for mothers like Mother and Mrs. Delafield to go around seeking spiritual experience if they wanted to, and it wouldn't do Dad any real harm. But there was no sense having it mess things up for a beautiful, popular girl like Doris.

I definitely did not want any girl evangelist in the family. I thought they were terrible. One of the churches had had a set of revival meetings with a girl evangelist and we went a few times. I thought they were preposterous. Going around posing for pictures in the paper with the Bible in one hand and an orchid in the other!

I blamed Dorry's condition mostly on the war but it was partly Mother's fault. She had kept ramming it down our throats until a

sensitive girl like Dorry naturally leaped over the traces, or was pushed over.

Father kissed Doris when he left for the office but he didn't say anything. He sputtered a little but couldn't muster up any words. I could see he was as flabbergasted as I was.

When we were ready to start for school Mother put her arm around Doris. Mother's lips were so cold and white it was hard for her to speak but she said faintly, "Hold onto It, Doris; hold hard. I used to have flashes of It—but I let It go. Hold hard."

"I don't think I have to, Mother. I think It is holding hard to me. But I won't let go, Mother!"

I felt sicker than ever.

As we walked down the street Doris sang happily, "Oh, what a beautiful morning, Oh, what a beautiful day!" Aren't you happy, Cherry?"

"No, I'm not. And I think it's a lousy day. And don't you go trying to convert me, Doris. I've got all the religion I want. You lay off me or I'll sick Skivar onto you." Next to Larry, I was Skivar's favorite in the family and he wouldn't let anyone touch me if he could help it.

Doris laughed.

"And what's more," I went on, "if I ever catch you posing for photographers with a Bible and an orchid I'll—disown you."

"Poor, dumb little cluck," she said affectionately.

I kept glancing at her sideways. Doris was a beautiful girl. She took after Mother. I take after Dad, worse luck. Dad's all right but certainly no beauty. Doris had always been extremely good-looking but that morning she looked—well, radiant. Yes, radiant. Radiant and shining with a little smugness thrown in.

On the drugstore corner we met Slim Gravesend. Lieutenant Gravesend he was now. My heart went right through the soles of my shoes. Doris would begin throwing up the Bible to him and there would be an end of my ice-cream sodas on the side.

But she didn't.

"How about a movie tonight, Dorry?" he said. "It's pretty bad but the best there is. Maybe we can have a turn or two at Pinky's afterward."

"Oh, grand! I'll love it!" That relieved me a good deal. I had thought she would probably give up movies, and certainly Pinky's Place, as too worldly for her in her exalted condition.

"You look wonderful this morning, Dorry. Wonderfuller and wonderfuller!" Slim said admiringly. "Any word from Larry?"

"No. But we know he's all right. We aren't worried about him."

"I am," I said stubbornly. "I'm worried as the dickens."

"I'm not," Doris said.

"You look so gaga and goggly I thought maybe you'd had good news," Lieutenant Gravesend said. "Not a bit hard on the eyes, is she, Cherry?"

"No, but she's tough on the ears," I said. "Darn tough."

They laughed and we went on to school. I didn't laugh but I felt better, if such a low feeling could have any better side to it. At least she wasn't going to pass up movies and dancing. Not yet anyhow. It might come later. I was prepared for anything from that point and I must say I expected the worst.

It was a little embarrassing when we sat down at the table for dinner that night. Mother glanced tentatively at Doris, not knowing whether to suggest the blessing or to start eating. We picked up our napkins slowly but we were all waiting.

Doris bowed her head and said blithely, "For Thy prodigious bounty, Lord, we thank You. Amen."

Then she began telling Mother about her date for the evening.

I must say Father looked as relieved as I felt.

I hated like heck to go to church the next Sunday and yet I couldn't stay away because for my own peace of mind I had to know what happened. I sat next to Doris and I was alert and watchful. I made up my mind that the first "Amen" or "Hallelujah" out of her, I would give her a pinch she would remember for a while. But there were no Amens or Hallelujahs. She sat quietly, almost motionless, through the entire service, her head bent a little sideways, a sort of puzzled, questioning look in her eyes.

"What did you think of the sermon, Doris?" Mother asked when we were at dinner.

"I didn't get what he was driving at most of the time," Doris said. "I don't know much, you know. I thought he made it sound too

hard. Part of the time I thought I was asking for bread and getting a stone." Then she smiled. "But we don't have to go to church to get bread. The air we breathe is manna."

"I hope you're not going to begin talking parables, Doris," I said coldly. "It may have been the style in Biblical days but nowadays we are accustomed to calling a spade a spade."

As soon as we finished dinner Mother went to the desk. She rummaged around for papers and clippings and snapshots. We looked at her in surprise.

"I'm going to write to Larry," she said. "I can't think what came over us all to make us so neglectful. His mail will probably be forwarded to him, somewhere, sometime. Or maybe they'll just keep it stacked up waiting for him when he gets back to his outfit. I'm ashamed of all of us."

She spent the entire afternoon writing page after page to Larry, trying to crowd into one letter all the things she had not told him during those weeks since he was missing in action.

It is impossible for me to explain how things went after that. I didn't understand it then and I don't understand it now. Maybe religion is contagious like measles. Nobody seemed to do anything special but something came over us, something changed us. At least it changed everybody else; not me; I was the same as usual. But something happened to Mother. She didn't say anything about it, and she didn't mention religion again, but she relaxed. The tense, hard brightness went out of her. She began to smile again, not just forcing a movement of her lips but smiling from the inside out.

And Dad changed, too. He quit puffing up like an imminent stroke of apoplexy. And we all began writing to Larry again, just as if we knew exactly where he was and what he was doing. I am sure we quit worrying. I didn't have any religious feeling about him but I lost that worried feeling. I suppose I felt that Doris was taking care of him. You'd be surprised how quiet and contented we were, even with that "missing in action" hanging over us day and night.

If Doris was away from home for dinner or late getting down for breakfast, Dad or Mother asked the blessing as if it were the most natural thing in the world. But when Doris came in she always dropped her head for a second and her lips formed the words, "I

thank You." That was all. She was really quite religious but not at all obnoxious about it and she never made a pass at trying to convert me.

She was more popular and had more dates than ever before. It seemed to me every really nice boy in town was after her. I noticed though that when Slim—Lieutenant Gravesend—asked her for a date, if she had already made other arrangements she went to a good deal of trouble to switch things around and be on hand. I did not consider that particularly religious but it was perfectly natural. Slim Gravesend was choice, he was really choice.

## VIII

APRIL WAS nearly over before Mrs. Delafield's son got the leave that had kept the whole town in a dither for months. Our excitement had simmered to a low ebb but when she telephoned that he was in the United States and right down at Mitchell Field, everything blazed up again. Mrs. Delafield was laughing and crying and Mother could hardly understand her at first but gradually made out that he would be home the next morning, Saturday, and that she was going to have Dorry's crowd, his crowd by absentee adoption, for supper Sunday night. She invited me, too.

The news went like wildfire. I shouldn't be surprised if the operator had been listening in, for inside of ten minutes all Dorry's friends began calling up to ask about it, and if we had seen him, and whether he was good-looking.

Saturday afternoon was just as bad. They all phoned again to ask if he had arrived. It seemed they had been milling around town all morning, hoping to get a glimpse of him but he was not in evidence. We hadn't seen him either but we knew all about it. Mrs. Delafield had reported that he got in as planned but was very tired and was putting in the day catching up on some lost sleep.

I wish you could have seen our church on Sunday morning. If anybody had called the roll, it would have registered one hundred

percent as far as the young crowd was concerned. There were some there who did not regularly attend our church at all and two or three who probably had never seen the inside of a church except in motion pictures. Neither Mrs. Delafield nor Steve put in an appearance so the whole thing fell rather flat except for those who were interested in the service.

We weren't let down, but we were the only ones. Mrs. Delafield had already told Mother he was still tired and rather distraught and preoccupied and she was letting him take things easy. She told Mother he seemed older and she did hope we were not going to be disappointed in him.

We couldn't imagine what she meant by that. We had never seen him in our lives and did not know what to expect of him so how could we be disappointed?

Slim Gravesend came to take Dorry to the party and since I was right there and had no date, they couldn't very well get out of taking me along, but they didn't seem to mind much. All the way over they kept wondering what he would be like. I wondered, too. Slim said he hoped he wasn't the kind to try to pull rank on him at a social affair and Doris hoped he would hit it off well with Norma Case because Norma was her particular friend and wasn't having very steady dating since Bill Wiles had shipped to the Pacific.

As soon as I saw him, I knew what Mrs. Delafield meant when she was talking to Mother. I, for one, was disappointed. He did not look like a boy at all. He looked like a man, nearly an old man, a tired, stern old man. There were deep lines on his face which was tanned brown and looked like wrinkled leather. The color and the lines made his blue eyes look unnatural and made-up. He was tall and slim. It was a hard slimness.

When his mother introduced him, he responded a little stiffly, pleasantly enough but stiffly, with none of that free-and-easiness we were used to among ourselves. He was a complete outsider, not only to us but to his mother's home. I felt sorry for Mrs. Delafield.

It was a little awkward at first but the crowd soon swung into action under her direction. He stood around watching as the boys and girls got busy in his mother's kitchen, using her food, making themselves entirely at home. The boys broiled chicken in the fire-

place; the girls made biscuits and tossed up salad and dessert in the kitchen, with no end of scampering back and forth. In spite of the pleasant letters they had written, he wasn't part of the crowd. He was a guest; the way he acted, you'd have thought he was an uninvited guest.

Presently he came across and sat down beside me. My heart went straight up into my throat. I thought he looked as old, and a good deal crosser, than my grandfather.

"I don't know how to be a big brother to a kid sister, Cherry," he said. "Do you think you can teach me?"

I swallowed my heart. "It's very easy, if you really try." I finally got breath to say, and the sound of my own voice bucked me up a little. "If you want to be like my brother Larry, you must make fun of me. You must make fun of me all the time."

"Make fun of you?" He sounded so vague I hadn't much hope for him.

"Yes, laugh at me! Even if I hurt myself, or if I'm very sick, if I skate into a hole and half-freeze myself or ride a boy's bike over the embankment and smash myself, you must make fun of me."

"How can I make fun of you if you are half-frozen or half-smashed?"

"Larry does. Of course, you must be nice about it. You must wipe the blood off if I'm smashed and wrap me in your coat if I'm frozen, but you must make fun of me all the time."

"It sounds very bloodthirsty," he said.

"Not at all. That's what Larry does. He says, 'Listen, Squirt, aren't you ugly duckling enough without further flattening your pug nose and bloodying up your little squint eyes?'"

"But your nose isn't pug and your eyes aren't squint."

"They are if you compare them with Dorry's. Dorry's eyes and nose were good to begin with, but she's careful; she never flattens and bloodies them."

He looked across at Doris and then back at me. "Why do you?"

"Because I'm just naturally the kind of person that things just naturally happen to, that's why. I'm as innocent as a newborn babe and as careful as a mother cat, but I just naturally get myself flat-

tened and bloodied. Blood is the most unbecoming cosmetic in the world, but it comes natural to me."

He laughed suddenly, laughed out loud. I jumped. His laugh was quite pleasant. Mrs. Delafield looked over at us and glowed.

"I'm surprised," he said. "I see that a kid sister has the making of a lot of fun. I have only a month. Will you guarantee to bloody yourself inside of four weeks?"

"Since two weeks is my maximum I think I can safely promise that."

The others swarmed in then, with plates and glasses, and crowded around him. Mrs. Delafield made a little motion to me and I went over and sat beside her. "Do you like him?" she asked eagerly.

"Yes, I like him," I said cautiously. "I didn't like him until he laughed, though. He isn't at all like Larry. Larry laughs so easily."

"Help him, Cherry," she said in a low, sad voice. "Help him to laugh more often and more easily. He has only a month."

I sat there, looking on, and I didn't miss much. I was an outsider, too, but not as much as he was; I knew them all; I knew what to expect and I could give as good as I got. But I sat looking on. I saw right away that Doris was not going to fix anything up between him and Norma. There was a man there, a man from Du Pont, and he surrounded Norma like a flotilla. I never saw such an encirclement as he put on and he wasn't in the service. They could certainly have used him other places! But no, there he was, stuck with Du Pont and stuck on us. But I couldn't see that Steve looked at her much, anyway. He didn't look at anybody much. At his mother, more than anybody else, which surprised me, after what she had said to Mother.

I only spoke to him once more that evening. He came up as we were getting ready to go and said, "See here, I'm bothered about one thing. Suppose you do your bloodying when I'm not around! That's going to leave me out in the cold!"

"It never left Larry out in the cold. All the little brats in town went galloping after him, wherever he was, and told him I was at it again. And then he lit out for—wherever I was."

"I see. Then I have to organize the youngsters into a sort of Mili-

tary Police—a Cherry-police, if you like!—to call on me in a crisis!"

"You'll hear about it! Nothing has ever happened to me without everybody within two or three planets hearing about it almost before I regain consciousness."

"That's good. I'm on intimate terms with Mars. I'll get the alert from there."

As we were walking home, Slim, Doris and I, they talked about him. They said he wasn't at all what they expected. They said he looked very distinguished, didn't he? They wondered what all his decorations stood for.

"Why didn't you ask him?" I put in.

"Cherry! You can't just come right out and ask!"

"Maida Means did. I heard her."

"What did he say?"

"He said mostly they stood for how old he was, how straight he could shoot and how many inoculations he had taken."

"Cherry!"

"That's what he said."

"What did you think of him, Cherry?" Doris asked abruptly.

"Oh, he isn't so bad . . . when he laughs . . . except that he doesn't laugh. . . . You'd think he was Mrs. Delafield's ancestor!"

After school the next day I was waiting on the corner with Doris for the car to deliver her to Du Pont when he came along. He didn't look quite so old in the daytime and his uniform was beautiful. The ribbons and decorations looked very important. All the other students stopped what they were doing and what they were talking about and stared at him, but respectfully. He didn't seem to notice it.

He helped Doris into the car and then walked on toward home with me. "I've gathered from secret sources," he said, "that between the admirers of Larry and Doris, you have pretty soft pickings at certain soda fountains. Have you any objection to one on your own?"

"Not at all. I take my ice cream where it falls."

So we had a soda.

"How did you ever get so thick with Milady, Cherry?" he asked suddenly.

"You mean your mother? I'm not thick with her. She's much

thicker with Doris. She took me on as a sort of useless appendage—to please Mother, I think. She's lovely to me."

"She's too lovely. Loveliness should be a fine art, not a profession. Who is going to show me the local layout? Kid sisters ought to be good for something. They've almost got to be good for something I should think!"

"There isn't any local layout. It's just a town. There's country around it. There's a park but it isn't much. There's Mill Run—that's not bad if you can dodge baseballs. That's where we used to duck off after Sunday school before everybody began getting religion and we had to stick it out through church."

"Who began getting religion?" He smiled for the first time.

"Doris began it. She's religious as the dickens."

"She doesn't look it."

"She is, though. She's got it bad. And the darn thing's catching. I wouldn't even trust Father any more. I'll bet he sneaks the Bible into the bathroom with him."

He laughed. "You're an amazing little squirt!" he said. "Do you object to your father having religion? And why should he have to sneak the Bible? Is it *verboten* here, too?"

"Well, naturally he wouldn't want to get caught with it. . . . No, I don't object to parents having religion—in a mild way. I can't stand fanatics."

"Neither can I. I don't know any. Do you?"

"Well, there was that girl evangelist. Not that I really knew her! God forbid!" I said devoutly.

After our sodas he walked home with me and I told him who lived in the different houses and what I thought of them. When we got to our house he said, "By the way, I suppose as a local yokel I ought to have a date Saturday night. How about a movie?"

"Wouldn't you rather take one of the older girls?" I suggested.

"No. I'm going to have to work up to them gradually. I'd rather practice up on you, if you don't mind."

"Well, I don't mind," I said. But I said it reluctantly. I did mind. I was perfectly willing to do Mrs. Delafield a favor as stand-in for a kid sister, and it made me feel nice and conspicuous walking on the

street with him and everybody staring at his decorations, but for a Saturday night date I knew it would be more fun going out with my own crowd. But I couldn't very well refuse. So I said, "Well, all right. But if you change your mind before Saturday night it won't hurt my feelings. Only," I added quickly, "please do it in time for me to have another date."

He laughed quite heartily. "I see. You don't care whom you go with as long as you go. Otherwise, it doesn't make any difference."

"Oh, it makes a little difference," I admitted. "But I always go with the first one that asks me—if he isn't too utterly impossible."

He was still laughing. "In other words, I'm not to flatter myself! I am simply the first one that asked you."

"Usually they don't get around to it until about Friday; sometimes Thursday," I said evasively.

"I'll remember that," he said. "If I'm later than Wednesday I'm not first and you'll be tied up."

"Usually," I said, and added honestly, "if my luck's good."

Dorry's crowd began having parties for him right away. Maida Means set the ball rolling and the others fell right into line. They said they were going to give him the month of his life. I wasn't invited but that didn't surprise me; I didn't expect to be invited. Mrs. Delafield had us all at her house for dinner on Wednesday, just our family, and she invited me. Slim was there too. She invited him so Steve wouldn't be the only young man there, not that I considered him young by any means. The food was delicious but there was nothing else very exciting about it. I was sorry I hadn't gone to the movies with Artie; I would have gone, too, but Mother wouldn't let me. She said it would disappoint Mrs. Delafield.

I ran into him several times on the street, usually on my way home from school. Friday afternoon he set me up to a coke and walked home with me.

"How many youthful swains are indebted to me for a broken heart this week?" he said.

It was a silly way of putting it but I knew what he meant. "Only two," I said. "It's not my best week. And Artie's gone to New York for the week end so I hope you haven't changed your mind."

"No, I haven't. Maybe after the movie we can have a dance or two at Pinky's."

"I'm not allowed to go to Pinky's," I said. "It isn't considered respectable for mothers and kids. Just that tough old crowd."

"I see."

He didn't say anything else but when he came for me on Saturday night—Doris said Maida was furious about that because she had planned something very extra special but she supposed he had to put himself out to please his mother once in a while—he put it bravely up to Mother.

"Mrs. Gillespie, if we stay for just three dances, do you mind if we stop by Pinky's on the way home?"

"No," Mother said, "I don't mind." And then she added quickly, "Cherry doesn't drink, Steve."

"Fine! That's fine! I'll save money on her!"

"And don't stay late," Mother went on. "They get very rowdy there when it's late."

"Nothing rowdy, I give you my word."

I was excited about going to Pinky's Place. That was one thing to be said for going out with one of Mother's friends' sons, even if they were a little old and solemn. She wouldn't have considered for a minute letting me go to Pinky's with one of my own friends.

So we went to Pinky's. He got a table for two and ordered sandwiches for both of us, a coke for me and a highball for him. As soon as the music started we got up to dance.

He was quite tall, taller than Larry. It's hard to explain how things happen the way they do because there isn't any explanation. They happen, that's all. I did not feel a bit sad. I was excited about being there and we danced very well and everything was perfectly all right. But I felt like crying. And then I cried. I was humiliated to death. I kept my head down and close against him and at first I cried like a lady without making any fuss but finally I gave a big gulp that I knew he couldn't help feeling. I tried to get a look at his face to see how outraged he was but I could feel the tears on my lashes so I ducked my head again.

"Just keep your head down, Honey, and keep on dancing. It's

the uniform, isn't it? It makes you think about your brother. You know what I'm going to do as soon as I'm shipped back over? I'm going to look for him. I'm going to get my whole outfit looking for him. I'll set all the undergrounds working out from London on his trail. Word does seep in and out of the prison camps sometimes and if enough of us keep asking about him, we're almost sure to hear something sometime. . . . I'm lousy at this big brother stuff! I ought to be making fun of you, oughtn't I? But I can't make fun of you because you don't seem a bit funny to me. You seem sweet, that's all. Is your nose bloody?"

I shook my head. "Sniffly! That's worse!"

I was all over it by the time the dance ended and we went back to our table. Our sandwiches were there and the coke and highball. He began talking right away. He told me about the convoy he came home in, and what a swell job the Navy did, maneuvering the boats and how exciting it was.

"Military secrets, of course," he said. "I hope you are not an enemy agent in disguise."

"Did you ever hear of an enemy agent with squinty eyes and a red nose?"

"That's so, too. There's nothing insidious about squinty eyes and red noses. You're bound to be safe."

We danced again and it was all right that time. He was a smooth dancer.

When we went back to the table, Doris and Slim and three other couples of her crowd had come in and were there waiting for us. Maida Means was with them, of course, and she must have been hard up that night for she was with Guy Reed. Usually she couldn't see Guy Reed. None of us could. It wasn't only that he was 4F; he actually wanted to be 4F and did everything he could to stay that way. But 4F or 1A, he would still have been a meat ball.

The waiters shoved other tables and chairs up to ours and we all sat together. I tried to look as blasé and sophisticated as the rest of them but I was conscious of the crib and high chair in my background. When Steve told them we had to leave after the next dance because of his promise to Mother, Doris said she would phone and ask her. She said she was sure it would be all right as long as she was there to

look after me. She reported back that I must leave the minute any rowdy rumpus started and must leave at twelve-thirty anyhow, rumpus or no rumpus.

Steve danced with the other girls and their dates had to dance with me out of sheer politeness. Steve was the best dancer.

When it was my turn to dance with him again he said, "Have you had enough, Cherry?—I mean Squirt—Let's go after this one. I'm taking to this kid-sister stuff like a proverbial duck to proverbial water. I may turn out better than you think."

"You're doing all right," I said. "But you forgot to grouse about the tearstains on your blouse. That was careless of you. Larry would use that for days and days."

It was not twelve-thirty but we left after that dance. Doris and her crowd stayed on. They invited Steve to come back and rejoin them and he said maybe he would. But he didn't. Mother and Dad were still up and he went in with me and talked to them. Mother served coffee and rich banana cake and he answered Dad's questions about the war and Mother's about what the soldiers get to eat, and it was one-thirty when he said he must go home and give his little old lady her sleeping pill and hot water bottle.

The whole thing turned out much better than I had anticipated.

I didn't see much of him the next week. Dorry's crowd was giving him no end of a rush. I thought he might accidentally ask me to a movie and Pinky's Place again on Saturday night and I stalled Artie a couple of days. Then Doris told me he had a hot and heavy date with Maida Means. They were going to New York, just the two of them, to take in a show and a night club. I couldn't stand Maida Means. Doris didn't like her either, not a bit better than I did, but she didn't say so much about it.

Larry had developed a minor crush on her just after he finished college and while usually Dorry and I were careful not to spill the beans on anyone in either of our sets, because there were some people you had to put up with no matter what you thought of them, we gave it to Maida. We gave her the works! And much to our surprise, without our saying a word, Mother caught onto it and played right in with us. We virtually had Maida Means from breakfast to bedtime for a couple of weeks. Mother invited her over so

often she was almost living at the house and Mother cooed over her while Doris and I gave her the treatment.

Dorry would say, with what seemed like friendly gaiety, "Oh, Maida, did you tell Larry about that time you got stuck in Trenton with the truck driver? It was the funniest thing I ever heard! Do tell it!"

And the incident was anything but complimentary to Maida, although she colored it up in her favor as much as she could.

Inside of two weeks, we had Larry so sick of her he couldn't see her with binoculars. And now here was Steve giving her the rush! Anyhow, he wasn't in our family so I wouldn't have to put up with her.

I went to the movie with Artie and we had ice cream and coke at the drugstore. It was all right. He held my hand during the movie and told me several times that it had burned him up watching that old war horse trying to crash his gal and if he hadn't so much respect for the uniform he would have bashed him one right on the nose.

"His nose isn't in uniform," I reminded him. But he said it sized up to the same thing.

On the whole, it wasn't as much fun as usual. I was glad when it was over.

## IX

EARLY SUNDAY morning I heard Mother slip softly downstairs, as she did every morning. I heard her open the front door to let Skivar out and get the paper. Then she gave a little scream.

"Oh!" And then: "Steve! You—you startled me!"

I sat up in bed.

"I thought," Mother was saying, "I thought . . . I saw the uniform first! . . . I thought it was Larry!"

"Oh, Mrs. Gillespie, forgive me! I never thought of that! Please forgive me." It was Steve's voice all right. "I had a low night, a lousy night. I didn't want to raise the house at this ungodly hour so I was waiting for somebody to show signs of life. I never thought—

what you might think. Since Mother has decided I am to live, move and have my being in these parts I thought maybe Cherry would take a few hours off and show me bits of the surrounding territory. I hope she hasn't developed middle-aged feet yet, for I can do with a bit of walking."

"No, of course not. . . . Yes, of course." Mother's voice still sounded confused. "She isn't up yet. Come on in, Steve. I'll call her. We'll have some coffee."

I got up and began to dress. I kept as close to the door as I could, to hear as much as possible.

"I'll call her as soon as I get the water on," Mother said. "The fresh air and exercise will be good for her."

"I hope so. I know she isn't going to like the company. I'm in a foul mood."

"That will be good for her," Mother said, rather idiotically I thought. "Most people are so pleasant that a change will be good for her. She loves variety."

She came to the foot of the stairs and called my name softly.

"I'm up! Be right down!" I called back, just as softly.

When I went down she and Steve were drinking coffee at the kitchen table. There was a glass of orange juice ready for me and a couple of sweet rolls.

"Look what I found on the front porch," Mother said brightly.

Steve stood up and looked at me with a very forbidding expression. "My mistake, Cherry," he said grimly. "I should have stuck to the kids. Last Sunday morning I felt like a million dollars."

"How do you feel today?" I asked.

"Like ten million worms and warts," he said, and he was not smiling. Smiling was very hard for him. "Sunday school will be the loser if I spirit you away to the hills and vales, and you will be the loser, too. I am the only one who stands to gain by the nefarious deed. Think you can put up with it?"

"I'll try. Maybe we can find a brook with a sermon in it."

"If we do, I hope it will keep its mouth shut. I am in no mood to be preached at."

"That's probably because you need it. They shy at sermons who need them most."

He smiled then but not very merrily. "I feel better already," he said. "Ah, youth, youth! Backward, turn backward, O time in thy so-and-so and touch up my graying locks with—a good vegetable rinse."

"You may take the car if you like," Mother said. "We ought to be a coupon or two ahead and if the morale of our armed forces doesn't rate them, I don't know what does."

"Thank you. But if the squirt can stand it, I'd rather walk. I'm muscle-bound. I'm soul and spirit-bound too. A little sod beneath the GI's may limber me up a little."

"You'd better take some fruit and cookies," Mother said. "Cherry locomotes best when she is well stoked."

"Ah, youth, youth!" he said again. "To think I'll never be young again!"

"How old are you, Steve?" Mother asked.

"A thousand and twenty-four. It's the thousand that weighs me down."

"I don't suppose I'll live to be twenty-four," I said. "I'm too good to attain such maturity."

"Don't worry about the twenty-four, but shun the thousand. It's the thousand that gets you."

When we were ready to start he said to Mother, "Would you mind phoning my little old lady after a while? Tell her her dear little town took me to town last night. Tell her I'll be home eventually."

"Didn't you go home at all last night?" Mother was quite shocked.

He shook his head. "I had breakfast at the diner at four and then walked around awhile and day was coming on apace so it seemed silly to think of going to bed. In fact, I didn't think of it. So I took possession of your porch railing and waited."

"You're not so old as you think you are," Mother said. "Cherry would have more sense than that."

We set off with a little box of fruit and cookies. Skivar escaped and wanted to go with us, and we had to take him back three times. Finally Mother locked him in the cellar.

We walked along with our box of fruit and cookies. It would have been exciting except that he was so frightfully glum. Otherwise it was exciting.

It was early morning and it was May. The grass was all greening everywhere. Buds were popping out, tiny leaves were uncurling, and jonquils, daffodils and tulips made bright borders along the walks and driveways. The forsythia was gorgeous and gay.

We walked blocks.

"It's your own fault," I said suddenly. "I know what's the matter with you. It's Maida Means. She wears everybody down. You've got to learn how to pick and choose. Some of those big girls are really swell."

"Which ones?"

"Doris and Norma are the best. Adelaide and Kathie and Bernie are all right. Lu and Miriam aren't too bad. But Maida Means! Gosh, Larry certainly had a narrow squeak!"

He grinned a little. It was a wry grin. "How did he work it?"

"He didn't work it! He was too dumb. We worked it for him!"

"It's beginning to sound like something. Start with 'Once upon a time.' "

"Oh, she began making passes at him after he finished college, and Larry fell for her like a house afire. She takes them all in her stride, one after another, but I notice none of them sticks it out very long. But Larry is such a softie-pie that we got goose-pimples over it. So we swung into action. We gave him plenty."

"What did you give him?"

"All the dope. We did it conversationally, like ordinary table chit-chat, so he didn't know we had ganged up to give him the works. Mother ganged up with us."

"Did she know the dope on her, too?"

"No, but usually Doris and I are so friendly that she knew if we were united against her, there had to be a good reason. Do you know what I think of Maida Means?"

"No, what do you think?"

"When I meet her and she offers to buy me an ice-cream soda I tell her no thanks, I'm in a hurry. You can't think less of anybody than that, can you?"

He laughed. "I suppose not. Well, go on, save me! Give me the dope!"

"Oh, no. You're not my brother. I'm not spilling any beans ex-

cept for the good of my own family. If you want to wish anything like that off on your poor dear mother, God help her, but it's none of my business."

He really laughed then. "I don't!" he denied quickly. "But if I did, wouldn't it make you her kid sister-in-law?"

"God forbid. And if He doesn't, I do it myself. I wash my hands of both of you."

We kept on walking. We were out of town now, walking on the highway. The country was beautiful.

"There's a brook," he said suddenly. "Let's run. It's probably spouting a sermon and I've had all the preaching I can stand for one day."

"I wasn't preaching!" I said indignantly. "I haven't even got my first wind up! I was just telling you."

We stood on the little bridge and looked down at the creek. I chucked a few stones in.

"That looks a nice spot down under that willow," he said. "Shall we rest awhile?"

"Well, I don't mind resting. But don't get muscle-bound! I'm not going to push you home! If you get muscle-bound you can stay there."

We went down and it was a ducky spot, with the tender little willow boughs drooping over us and the tender little grass beneath. We sat there and looked at the creek. Suddenly, Steve turned over and sprawled out on the grass with his head on his arms. He began to cry. It was terrible. I had never seen a man cry before. They do not cry like women, quietly. They cry from somewhere deep down inside and it wrenches the whole body, clear down to their feet. It was terrible. At first I thought, "Well, this cancels that night at Pinky's when I stained his uniform." And then I began wondering if maybe somewhere in Italy, or Greece, or Germany, maybe sometimes Larry cried like that.

I got up and walked off down the creek a little way. I picked some wild flowers. I made a bouquet and stuck it in my belt. I put a couple of cornflowers in my hair and picked out a lovely one for Steve's lapel. I glanced back a few times and after a while I saw he was sitting up again. I wandered around a little longer and presently

he got up and went down to the creek and splashed handfuls of water on his face. I had already dipped my hand in it and it was cold as ice. He mopped his face with a handkerchief and came down the creek to meet me.

I put the cornflower in his lapel. "Blues to the blue," I said.

"It's against Army regulations," he said cheerfully. "I shall probably be shot at sunrise and what a dose of castor oil that would be for a world that is sick at its stomach."

"Don't keep blaming things on the world!" I said angrily. "The world doesn't think any more of Maida Means than I do. It certainly takes all kinds! Poor world!"

He laughed. "You really are a nice little squirt, Honey, as squirts go. Shall we push along?"

We went back to the road and walked on. I was a little tired. I was sure we had walked no end of miles. I ate an apple and a cookie and felt better. He did not care for any.

Fortunately, an old truck came along. It was a dilapidated old farm truck, not one of the big streamlined carriers. Steve thumbed his finger and the driver stopped. He stopped in about two turns of the wheels, the old truck not going any faster than that.

"Ostensibly we are out for exercise," Steve said. "But at this point we find we could do with a hitchhike."

The driver was so pleased he beamed at us. Steve helped me up and then got in himself, all three of us in the front seat because it was the only seat. Steve put his arm around me and I leaned over against his uniform.

"My name's Delafield," he said.

"Captain, ain't it?" The driver put that in quickly.

"Yes, Captain. And this is a particular little friend of mine, Miss Gillespie."

"Pleased to meet you. My name's Carey. Martin Carey. It's an honor to have you in my truck. You been doing business overseas, I take it."

"A job or two," Steve said pleasantly. "We haven't done enough business there yet to suit me. I think I got in a few licks. And I hope with more to follow."

The driver, Mr. Carey, began asking questions about what the

ribbons and insignia on his uniform stood for. Steve told him in a friendly way, not in that brusque, shut-upping way he used with regular people. I went to sleep.

I wakened suddenly when the truck stopped creaking. A lot of little voices were screaming and dogs were barking. We were in a farmyard, occupied by four squealing children, two barking dogs and a good many chickens. A woman came out.

Steve helped me down and took off his cap. The driver gave each of the children a small bag of candy and shoved the dogs away.

"Mamie," he said, "I hope that was a big fat chicken you killed this morning. The Captain here and the little lady are going to stay for dinner. This is my wife, Captain, Mrs. Carey."

Steve shook hands with her.

The four children clustered around Steve and looked at his uniform. Mrs. Carey looked at me and smiled. "That's nice," she said. "By good luck it is two chickens and the fattest I could lay hand on."

"Are you a real captain?" the biggest little boy asked. "Did you kill anybody?"

"I am as real as they come," Steve said. "I've got the President's word for it. I guess maybe I killed a few. It was kill or be killed, you know."

"Did you kill Japs or Nazis?"

"Nazis. I was flying over from England. The Japs are on the other side."

"I'm learning to shoot," the biggest little boy said. "I hope they don't get them all killed before I'm old enough. I want to kill some, too."

"Just pray to God, son," Steve said soberly, "that they get enough killed soon enough to stop the slaughter. You've got the right spirit. But I hope you can use it on something better than killing Japs or Nazis."

The driver, Mr. Carey, and Steve were pals already. They went off toward the barn, children and dogs close at their heels. I went into the house with Mrs. Carey.

"This is a terrible imposition," I said. "I had no idea we were coming for dinner. I went to sleep in the car and they must have fixed it up between them."

"I can't tell you how happy we are," she said. "It's the first chance the children have had to speak to a man in uniform. When we go to town they stop dead in their tracks when they see one; they open their mouths and stare but this is their first chance to talk to one."

"He's home from England on leave," I explained. "We came for a walk in the country and I got tired, so he thumbed a ride. Weren't we lucky it was your husband he thumbed?"

"It was lucky for us," she said.

There was a wonderful odor in the kitchen. Chicken and spice and hot vinegar and cookies—a wonderful odor. The table had already been set in the dining room; she said they always ate in the dining room on Sunday. She changed the dishes for better ones. She laughed as she was doing it.

"The children will be so awe-struck in the presence of a uniform they won't break anything. At least I hope not and I don't care if they do. Do you think he really . . . killed a few?"

"He must have," I said. "He had to do twenty-five flying missions before he got home on leave. He almost had to kill somebody. He doesn't talk much about it. My name's Cherry, Cherry Gillespie. And he is Steven Delafield. Our mothers are old friends. They went to school together."

"I've seen those names in the paper. Wasn't there something about a Gillespie lately . . . something . . . I don't quite remember—"

"Yes," I said quickly. "There was something. It was my brother Larry. He is—missing in action—somewhere."

"I'm sorry."

"Steve's going to look for him when he goes back; he's going to get all his outfit looking for him. We haven't heard anything for weeks and weeks. It seems years."

"My dear, I'm sorry."

"Doris is sure he's all right. Doris is my sister. And of course—if anything had really happened—dead, I mean—they would have known about it; they would have told us; not just—missing in action. We think he's probably a prisoner somewhere or maybe some kind Arabs are taking care of him and nursing him."

"I think you're wonderfully brave about it."

"I'm not. I'm not a bit brave. I feel terrible. Doris is brave though;

and Mother is brave now, too. Dad and I aren't. We just stand it."

Mr. Carey and Steve came in then, laughing, talking like old friends, calling each other by their first names, Martin and Steve. The children and dogs were still at their heels. Mamie shoved the dogs out first, grabbed the children, one at a time, and scrubbed their faces and hands at the kitchen sink and we all went in to dinner.

You'd be surprised how much fun it was. The children kept asking Steve questions, really smart questions. They couldn't take their eyes off him even to eat the chicken, but just sat there drumstick in hand and eyes on him. He told them everything they wanted to know. He told them about little English children who flocked around camp and how they raided the PX and swiped candies and cookies from their friends' home packages to give them little gifts.

"Are you scared when you fly up and head for over there with all those bombs and antiaircraft guns ready to go off under you?" the biggest little boy asked.

"You bet I'm scared. We're all scared. War is terrifying and don't let anybody tell you it isn't. It's thrilling, though. You feel excited and lifted up, but scared just the same. Those planes are plenty big but you can't imagine how little they feel when you're stuck up there with the sky overhead and the Channel beneath. I suppose even the Empire State Building would feel little if you were on it, suspended in space between sea and sky. You forget how you used to curse the mud! You love mud when you're stuck up there with nothing but air to lean on."

"Air and God," Mamie said quietly.

"Yes. Air and God. And believe me, you thank God for God."

They were fascinated. I was almost fascinated myself. I could hardly believe it was the same person I had seen sprawled on the grass, shaking all over with sobs, such a little while ago.

The dinner was delicious. It was vinegar pie that had made that exciting odor in the kitchen. Everything was delicious.

When we were ready to start home they wouldn't hear of our walking. They said it would be an honor to drive us. They would get out the good car and take the children and make a holiday of it, as by rights it should be. The "good car" was a rattle-trap old Ford, but clean. Steve sat with Martin and the biggest little boy in the

front seat. I sat with Mamie and the three others in the back seat. They had to chain the dogs.

When we reached town Steve asked them to stop at the drugstore a minute. He went in and came back with his arms full of what he called "souvenir gewgaws" for the children, airplanes and wooden soldiers and little boats and dolls. They squealed over them but kept right on looking at Steve. Martin drove up to our house and Steve got out with me. We thanked them for a wonderful day and promised to see them again before he shipped out.

"Now you see, Squirt," he began, and then added quickly, "Honey," as if he thought I might be offended. I didn't mind. He was trying to big-brother me, like Larry. "You see, there really are a few things left that are worth fighting and dying for."

"Fight, but don't die," I said. "Try not to. Anything worth dying for is certainly worth living for, too."

He took both my hands and squeezed them. "Maybe you've got something there, Cherry. Yes, I think you really have!"

But in spite of my warning he did not keep away from Maida. Maida was never one to keep her mouth shut so Doris got the news from her and passed it on to me. Doris said she was making an end play for him and Steve couldn't help himself. I laughed at that. If I ever saw anybody who could outstrip an end play it was Steve Delafield; he just was not trying. I noticed that every time he had a date with her, I saw him the next day. Sometimes it was during the lunch hour, sometimes a coke after school. He said he had sauntered along for a breath of fresh air or a throat gargle. I did not say anything, it was none of my business, but I knew he had been out with Maida because she had bragged to Doris.

Dorry's crowd was still having parties for him almost every night and finally it was Dorry's turn. I didn't need an invitation for that because I lived there. But all the rest were paired off in couples and I can take a hint if I have to.

Dorry and I had almost a squabble over it when she was planning the party.

I said, "Who are you wishing off on Steve?"

"I'm not wishing anybody off on him. He is bringing Maida Means."

"Oh, he is! A nice trick to pull on Mother's old school friend's son!" I said.

"I'm not pulling any tricks. I can't help it. I don't like it any better than you do! But she always pipes up, 'Steve will bring me,' and what can I do? What can anybody do? Nothing! She's been pulling it right along and getting away with it."

Doris had her party. I stayed around awhile and then went upstairs like a perfect lady. I got into my pajamas and house coat. I settled myself against all the cushions on my bed with my radio turned on and my school books beside me. I didn't study. I didn't even listen to the radio. I sat there and listened to the idiotic outbursts of laughter downstairs.

When there was a knock on my door I was surprised because we never knocked. We just called the name softly and waited a minute and then walked in. When I got over being surprised I said, "Come in."

It was Steve.

He walked over and sat down on the side of the bed and lit a cigarette.

"I dropped in to advise no dates for Sunday," he said. "You are going with me out to say good-by to the Careys. I shan't make you walk this time. We'll cheat the USA and use a coupon. It will be my last Sunday."

"I would be sorry to see you go," I said coldly, "except that I think you will be much safer over there. It may be a purely personal opinion but they would have to prove to me, in black and white, that the Nazis are tougher to handle than Maida."

He smiled almost genially. "You certainly do not waste any love on that one!" he said. "Your solicitude would flatter me if you had not already told me how you schemed to get Larry out of her—shall we say—clutches? Or claws?"

"Sometimes I think hard-boiled men have more sense than fairly nice ones, like you and Larry," I said bitterly. "You don't see Slim—Lieutenant Gravesend—making any passes at her, do you? Or Wally Marks? Or Jim Barton?"

"No. But they are in love with Doris. Being in love is the safest safeguard. What I need is a good stiff falling-in-love."

"Well, if you are going to settle for Maida, kindly keep away from me. I know exactly what I can't take and she is all of it in one person."

"I'm not going to settle for Maida. . . . Why did you come up so early? I can't see that you look sleepy."

"I'm not sleepy but I'm no fool. I know when I'm not wanted."

"I wanted you. Listen, Honey. How about popping into a few duds and ducking out the back way with me and taking a walk? Or would your mother have kittens?"

"She hasn't had kittens yet, though nothing would surprise me. And I doubt if much would surprise her, either! But I can't do it. I'd really like to, but I can't. After all, this is our house and we're polite as heck. There's nothing I enjoy more than insulting Maida—but not in our house, Steve. I have too much manners."

"Okay. Go to sleep but don't sleep too soundly. Listen, Squirt. I'm going to need a mouth rinse after this. When they've all gone, give me twenty minutes to get the Maida menace home. Just twenty minutes. Then slip down to the porch and we'll have a look at the stardust. Your mother will probably spank you tomorrow and I'll leave you that to remember me by."

I dallied with the serpent. He—Steve, I mean—didn't look so old in the dim light of my room. "I've never done that before," I said. "I've done almost everything else—everything I could think of—but never that. I'll do it!"

He leaned over and kissed me. It didn't mean anything. I had been kissed before. "That," he said, "is a token. On Sunday I shall require a kiss for every spank. It's up to you to count them and don't cheat."

"Don't you cheat!" I said. "Twenty minutes! Twenty minutes and no more! If you make it half an hour, you can stay there and don't come around here for any early morning Rinso."

"It'll be twenty minutes. I won't ring the bell, Sweet. I'll just wait. Gosh, your poor little bumpers are going to hurt tomorrow. I think I'll visit high school. I would adore to see you do your lessons standing up."

He kissed me again. "One to grow on. Grow fast, Sweet." He sat there and smoked awhile. "I see you forgot to put a beauty mask

on! And no hair curlers! You're going to look a mess tomorrow! One of those housewifely slatterns! I'm glad I found you out in time! Check them out, Squirt, and check me back in, in twenty minutes."

I got up right away and dressed. I knew I had no business doing it but I knew I was going to. I slipped into Dorry's room and got her wrist watch, for I was going to time him. Twenty minutes he said. If he made it so much as twenty-one I was going straight back to bed. I looked pretty good when I got dressed. I knew it was dark and nobody could see me but I felt like looking pretty good.

The party went on interminably.

When I heard Mother and Dad saying stereotyped good nights preparatory to coming up, I shot back into bed and covered myself up to the chin. I closed my eyes. Mother came in for a look at me but I didn't bat an eyelash. She turned off my lights and went out, closing the door. I got up and listened. When I figured from the familiar sounds that they were settled for the night, I went out and sat on the top step.

They had rolled back the rugs of the living room and were dancing downstairs. I thought they would dance forever. I never heard so much laughter. And all over nothing! I listened carefully. There wasn't one remark that I considered really humorous but they were in gales over them.

They went to the kitchen and began cooking things. The odors came up annoyingly. I was hungry as the dickens but I was too proud to yield to mundane temptation. I sat there and sniffed and kept getting angrier and hungrier. I thought, the heck with all of them! Suddenly Steve came bounding up the stairs, two at a time, and nearly stumbled over me in the dark hall. He had sneaked me a trayful of sandwiches and little cakes and candies and a bottle of coke. All he said was, "Sit still and enjoy it, Honey-Squirt. You won't be able to sit tomorrow!"

I didn't bother to say thanks. After all they were our refreshments and Dad was paying for them, but I enjoyed them. It seemed hours later when they began making moves toward departure. I went back to bed but left my door ajar so I could hear them gushing over Doris and telling her how lovely it had been.

I heard Steve say, "It was the nicest party of my whole life, Dorry. I'm going to take every minute of it back to war with me."

The hypocrite!

I heard Maida say, "Dorry dolling, you always do the nicest things! I wish I could come and live with you! Maybe we can get our parents to swap me for Cherry!"

"I constitute the majority and the majority is against it," Steve said. "No swap!"

I was furious. Anybody that wouldn't swap her for me was a plain dope. I had a notion not to get up at all. But it was so wicked, and the first time, too, that I decided there was no sense cutting off a naughty nose to spite a naughty face.

When they had gone, Doris moseyed around awhile, straightening furniture and taking dishes back to the kitchen and emptying ash receivers. Then she came up and went into her own room.

I waited a few minutes and then crept downstairs in my stocking feet, carrying my shoes. Nobody said a word. I could hardly keep from laughing. Such a wrong thing to be doing and everybody sleeping calmly away in their beds never suspecting a thing! When I opened the front door that beast Skivar slipped out ahead of me. Try as I would I couldn't entice him close enough to get hold of his collar and I didn't dare yell at him. I kept Dorry's watch turned toward the street light. Twenty minutes I was giving him—or maybe twenty-five. He came in fifteen.

"For heaven's sake!" I said. "How did you manage to break away?"

"I shall go down in history as the record-breaker in breaking away," he whispered. "I told her I had a date."

"You told her—I hope you didn't tell her who with—or is it whom?"

"Who or whom, I didn't tell her. You see, after all, there really are things worth fighting and dying for. Like this, Honey."

"And don't forget living for them," I said. "It's much harder. Though I haven't done much fighting and dying yet."

"Come along," he said. "We've got to get away from here before they catch us. You can take it where you've got it coming tomorrow, but tonight we've got to cut and run."

"That wretch Skivar is going to tag us," I whispered back. "I can't get him in without raising a hullabaloo."

"Let him tag. Come on."

We went away, walking very fast, Skivar galumphing around us. I had never been out at that time of night before. I felt excited and wild and a little like crying. But I didn't cry. He took my hand and pulled it up close inside his arm, holding it in his hand, and as soon as we were out of sight of the house we walked slowly. We were both laughing, though we hadn't said anything and there was nothing to laugh at.

We walked several blocks, not saying a word, still laughing. Finally I said, "Why don't you like Doris?"

"I do like her. I like her very much. Why do you think I don't like her?"

"Is it because she's too religious?"

"Too religious! You've mentioned her acute religion before, Honey. I don't know what you mean. She doesn't act religious."

"She is, though. She's very religious. She got herself converted awhile ago, all by herself in the middle of the night. I was furious at first but I don't mind now. I must say she's got the nicest religion I ever encountered. Not like those girl evangelists with Bibles in one hand and orchids in the other."

"I wouldn't suspect it! I must say it doesn't show on the surface. I like her, Honey, I like her very much. But she's so much in love with Gravesend that she thinks the rest of the sex is extinct."

"Slim Gravesend!" I ejaculated. "She's not in love with Slim Gravesend! You're a bigger moron than I thought—and I thought plenty! Why, Slim Gravesend—"

"She's in love with him. She's so in love with him that she drools. He's the apple of her pretty blue eye—both eyes."

"She couldn't be in love with Slim!" I argued. "She knows him too well. Why, we've known Slim since—we've always known Slim! I remember when I was in a cradle or something I looked out and there was Slim. There's always been Slim. Gosh, you can't even get to the icebox in our house without falling over Slim. She couldn't possibly be in love with him!"

"She is, Honey. She is! Tell me, Cherry, what is there very bad

that we can do and shouldn't in this good little town? You're going to be spanked anyhow, so you may as well get it for something worth while. What's the very worst thing we can do?"

"There's nothing worse than Pinky's Place. We can go there."

"Do you want to go there?"

"No. But it's the worst we've got."

"Then I'd better make love to you. That will be next worst."

We laughed but I said, "I wouldn't like that at all. I'd think you were thinking of Maida because everybody makes love to her. Think of something else."

"All right, I'll think about you. How old are you, Cherry?"

"Seventeen."

"Seventeen! A thousand years ago I was seventeen!"

"Maida doesn't consider you any Methuselah and neither do I. Sometimes you act like a perfect infant."

"Mewling and puking! I see what you mean."

You see how it was? Crazy, just crazy. It was only exciting because it was against the rules and I would be punished for it. But I didn't care.

"Well, if you promise to keep on thinking about me and forget Maida, go ahead and make love to me. I've got to learn sometime. Artie just holds hands and says he'd sock somebody on the nose if he hadn't so much respect for the uniform. How do they do it in England?"

"I don't know."

"You mean you've had twenty-five flying missions and still don't know how they make love?"

"That's right."

"I'll bet Larry knows. I'll bet even if he's in a prison camp somewhere he knows how they make love in those parts. He always knew."

"Yes, I suppose so. Larry is somebody real and I'm not. I'm a flop, Cherry. I'm a fair enough flier but otherwise just a flop. . . . That looks a nice spot up under that tree. Shall we sit down awhile?"

Doris and Mother had sort of drilled it into me that you mustn't get caught in a stalled car and if you're on foot you'd better keep walking or playing games or doing things, but I didn't remember the details

very well so we went up the bank and sat down. Skivar tried to sit between us but we shoved him out. Steve put his arm around me. He said, "Cherry, stay nice, won't you? It's wonderful to feel that there are some nice things at home, some nice people, especially some nice girls. One, anyhow. Stay nice, Honey, please stay nice."

"I'm not very nice to begin with or I wouldn't be here."

"That's the nicest thing about you. That you are here and still nice. . . . I don't care much for the back talk of that Artie you mentioned. Who the devil is Artie? I never heard of him."

"No, you wouldn't hear of him. He's my set. We're so far down the scale that we're less than the dust beneath your chariot wheels."

We lay back on the cool grass. It was exciting, the spring night, the late hour, the close darkness, the starry stars. Skivar tried to get between us but we pushed him out again and he crawled up beside me and began burrowing into my spinal column.

"We won't have much chance to talk after this," he said. "Sunday we'll drive out to see the Careys and Tuesday I ship out. But Cherry, remember this. Try to remember it. I love you. I love you because you are young and honest and impudent. When I get back over I'll raise merry hell trying to locate Larry for you. If we don't find him, Honey-Squirt, will you try to get along with me as a lousy substitute? Anything you ever want, anything you ever need, ask me. Will you? I don't know how to be a big brother and I can't bring myself to laugh at you because everything about you seems so sweet it is solemn, almost sacred. Yes, sacred. But I'll keep on trying. Maybe you'll seem more ridiculous in time."

I didn't say anything. What could I say? He wasn't Larry. He couldn't ever be Larry. I felt sorry for him. Suddenly, for no reason at all, it seemed very sad that he had never had any younger sisters, especially sisters like Doris with such a nice religion. We were lying there, close together, his arms around me and Skivar worming his way under me, inch by inch. The night was soft and lovely and the scent of apple blossoms drifted over us.

"Are you cold, Honey?"

"No. I feel wonderful. Don't forget that electric pad on the other side of me."

He laughed. "I'll do what I can for this side," he said.

And then I found myself saying—much to my surprise for I would have bitten my tongue off first—“Steve, I’m not really nice. Not really. I eavesdropped. That first day when your mother came to see Mother I left the porch door open on purpose so I could hear what they said. They talked about you.”

“Yes, I know. Mother told me. What did they say about me?”

“It’s none of your business, you inquisitive thing! You’re no better than an eavesdropper yourself!”

We didn’t say anything for quite a while, just lay there, close and warm. And then—I can’t explain why I did this; I didn’t even know I was going to do it—I put my hands up to his head and pulled it down until his lips were where mine were, just touching. He didn’t kiss me. It was better than kissing. I got very sleepy. I was almost asleep when I felt his lips moving.

“I love you,” he said, not really speaking, just moving his lips. “I love you. . . . I love you.”

Maybe he kept on saying it all night. Oh, I wish I had stayed awake!

Before the morning had begun to turn pink he shook me a little.

“Come on, come on, time to shove off! Buck up the bumpers, Honey. Nothing short of a major can lay hand on me but I hate to think of what you’re in for.”

I sat up and straightened my hair. Skivar licked my face. “You must have given me a mud pack while I was asleep,” I said. “My face feels tight.”

“It’s your conscience working from the outside in. There’s nothing so tightening as a good old-fashioned knock-’em-down, drag-’em-out conscience. . . . By the way, come to think of it, you’re not so beautiful as Doris, are you?”

“No, because Somebody in His infinite wisdom made me take after the wrong side of the family.”

“You look like dewdrops from heaven to me.”

“Dewdrops don’t come from heaven. They’re of the earth, earthy.”

“The kind you are come from heaven, heavenly.”

We sat there.

“Look at me, Cherry,” he said.

“I can’t. The light hurts my eyes.”

"What light?"

"The sunlight."

"There isn't any sunlight."

"Is there a moon?"

"No. Gone to bed."

"How about stars?"

"No stars! There's another kind of light though! Maybe you never heard of it. Such things aren't mentioned in the infant class."

"Skylight?" I hazarded.

"Lovelight."

I shook my head. "Never heard of it."

"Then look at me."

So I looked at him. He looked at me, too.

"I wanted to see if your eyes say the same thing, Cherry."

I kept on looking at him. "You don't look like the same person," I said.

"I'm not the same person. Nobody is the same person—after things happen. . . . Get a move on, Honey. Time to get a little backbone into those bumpers."

He brushed off my skirt, buttoned his coat and straightened his tie. I whistled to Skivar and we set off toward home. We went around a couple of blocks and stopped at the diner on the corner by the gas station. It was empty except for the cook who was asleep with his head on the counter. He looked up and it was Guy Haven who had been in high school a couple of years ago.

He said, "Howdy, General! Why, hello, Cherry. What are you doing up before breakfast?"

"She's helping recondition me before I am shipped back," Steve said pleasantly. "We can do with some pancakes and Java as a starter-off. And how about some not too bare bones for the mutt?"

"Sure, sure! I get a great kick out of seeing people walk these days. It must surprise 'em to find that legs can be used for something that ain't jitterbugging. Plenty of bones for the mutt! He eats here half the time anyhow."

We sat in one of the little stalls and Skivar munched happily away on the bones under the table. We didn't say anything. Once in a while I looked at him. He was looking at me. I'm fond of hot cakes

but I did not feel hungry. It was very early, not near breakfast time.

He was nice about one thing. He not only went up to the door with me; he went in and said he would wait to square things with Mother. I knew he meant to be helpful but I wished he would go on home. I could have slipped into bed and they might not have heard a sound. But he wouldn't do it. He sat there smoking.

When Mother came down she stood in the doorway and looked at us. She was shocked. She didn't say a word. Steve stood up.

"I know she has to be spanked, Mrs. Gillespie," he said. "That's your job. I'm glad it isn't mine. But she has it coming to her. I prevailed on her youthful sympathies, so she sneaked out with me after the party and we took a little walk. I hope you won't spare the rod, but when you are laying it on, remember that she is my little salvation and spank harder."

I was glad Father wasn't down. I never saw Mother more upset.

"Did you stay out all night?" she asked faintly.

"No, all morning. The night was virtually over before we got started. I had to take Maida home first. The day began at two-thirty. Give her a couple of good licks for me, for she well deserves them. My salvation, but if salvation can't take what is coming to it, who can?"

She was certainly upset. She didn't say anything but good-by when he started to leave, didn't suggest his staying for breakfast or mention seeing him again. She just looked at him.

He kissed me lightly on the forehead.

"Good-by, Squirt. I'll stop at the drugstore for some salve to soothe your lacerations."

I didn't say anything either. And I didn't look at him.

"What did you do, Cherry?" Mother asked, with marked restraint, when he had gone.

"Nothing. We walked and talked. Skivar went with us. Then we lay down on the grass and went to sleep."

"You—went—to—sleep?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Didn't he do—anything?"

"No, Mother. We just went to sleep. He nearly kissed me, but not quite." I didn't tell her it was nicer than kissing.

"You'd better not mention this to your father, Cherry. You had absolutely no right to do such a thing. I can't imagine what has come into everybody! I suppose it's the war. I'm terribly ashamed of you. But don't say anything about it to your Father and Doris. . . . And don't let it happen again!"

## X

HE DIDN'T have any more dates with Maida. Nor with anybody else. The old crowd had arranged to go en masse to Pinky's on Saturday night but he canceled his part of it. He told them—and it wasn't true—that he had to go to Mitchell Field for a conference, and they couldn't argue because you can't argue with the War Department. He said he was going to drive in anyhow and might as well take full advantage of the coupons, so he asked Doris and Slim Gravesend and me to go with him.

I thought at first Mother wasn't going to let me. She sat and thought for quite a while. "All right, you may go," she said at last, passionately. "But you see that you come home with Doris!"

"Of course, Mother," I said meekly.

Doris laughed. "What else could she do?" she asked. "She talks so much we couldn't accidentally lose her en route, even if we wanted to."

I didn't say anything. Neither did Mother.

I sat in the front seat with Steve, who was driving. We didn't go near Mitchell Field. We went to a place in New York, not a night club, but a place where there was good music, good dancing music but not noisy. We had dinner and danced. I danced with Slim a few times but mostly with Steve.

"You'll have to put up with me, Honey," he said. "They aren't going to have many more evenings together, and while I don't want to hurt your feelings, I'm sure he'd rather dance with Doris."

I didn't care. Slim danced well enough but all he talked about was Doris. Steve hardly talked at all. It was the most grown-up evening I'd ever had and I was so excited I could hardly stand it.

As we were driving home, Doris and Slim necked in the back seat. They really necked. Doris had never done that before me. It made me realize I was getting pretty old.

Steve drove mostly with one hand. He took my left glove off and held my hand in his, close against him. When he had to use his right hand on the wheel he took my hand along with his. It was silly and kept us laughing.

When we got home they walked up to the door with us. Slim put his arms around Doris and kissed her. He had never done that before me before. Steve laughed.

"Hold her, Slim," he said. "I am apt to get clawed and I don't want blood on my best uniform."

Then he kissed me.

On Sunday, Mrs. Delafield had invited the crowd, and me, too, for another Sunday evening supper, Steve's last Sunday. But he told her he had a prior commitment with the Careys so she called the crowd up and canceled it.

He came for me early Sunday afternoon and we drove out to the farm. He had taken toys and candies for the children and it was all very nice but we didn't stay long. We drove farther out and had supper at a little place, and as we were driving home he pulled off into a side lane and parked. This was strictly against the rules but I did not say anything. I had discovered that Mother's friends' sons could get away with anything.

He put his arms around me and I laid my head on his shoulder.

"Cherry," he said, "I suppose it's a hard thing for a girl to promise; one never knows what's going to happen and sometimes the things that happen make us do what we never intended and never wanted. But try to stay nice, won't you? Try hard. Stay nice and fresh and impudent. I couldn't bear to come back and find you gone stale and polite and circumspect."

"It's rude to be impudent," I said. "Mother doesn't allow it."

"Well, stay a little impudent. You needn't run it into the ground."

"I'll bet Maida is chewing off her overpolished fingernails," I said, because it popped into my head unexpectedly.

He laughed. "She will probably find them quite digestible," he said.

"I hope not. Acute indigestion is the best I can possibly wish for her."

"I wish I could take you with me. We pick up stray dogs and kittens and goats as lucky pieces and mascots. If we could have a certain little Squirt to rub us the wrong way we might really go places."

"If I thought I could find Larry I'd stow away and go with you."

"Do you love him so much?"

"Yes. Everybody loves him. He's not like the rest of us. He's not overreligious like Dorry nor overnaughty like me. He's just swell."

"I see. I think you are a swell family, Cherry. I wish I had one just like you."

"You'd live to regret it."

"Yes, probably. But it would be worth it. You all say such nice things about one another. The things you say about Larry—he's a lucky guy; alive or dead, he's lucky. And you are always telling me how grand Doris is, except maybe a little too religious, which I must say does not show in her very pretty face. What do you think she says about you?"

"Who?"

"Your overly religious Doris. Who else?"

"What does she say about me? Why should she say anything about me? Who did she say it to?"

"To me, for one. I don't know how many others. What your religious Doris says about you, Honey-Squirt, is this. She stands up very straight without smiling and with a firm look in her lovely eyes and says, 'My sister Cherry is the nicest kid that ever lived and if anybody ever hurts her, I will kill him; with my two bare hands I will kill him.'"

"Not Doris!" I said incredulously. "She couldn't kill a fly!"

"With her two bare hands she will kill him! I hope she's warned that Artie individual. She certainly warned me."

"Are you sure it was Doris?"

"Sure, I'm sure. Twice the little wart stood up to me and ticked me off."

"She doesn't know about that night we stayed out," I said. "Mother told me not to tell and I didn't." I couldn't resist adding, "Maida would have had it in the *Morning News*."

"Probably. I was too smart to keep her out all night. . . . Well, can you picture your gentle, religious Doris with her two bare hands at my throat?"

"She's a moron. She must be a moron. Why should anybody hurt me? And if anybody does hurt me, I can do my own slapping back without any help from her."

"Don't dye your hair, Honey. Don't ever dye your hair. If you do I'll yank it out for you, shred by shred. Doris will probably gang up with me and we can take you shred about."

"Why should I dye my hair? It's not the best color in the world but such as it is, it ought to last for years and years."

"I'm just warning you in advance, like Dorry. If I hurt you she's going to choke me. If you dye your hair, I'm going to de-hair you. Take notice. Be warned."

"All right, then you take notice and be warned. If you do any more messing around with Maida Means, don't come back to me for a gargle."

"Were you ever jealous, Honey?"

"Yes. I'm jealous all the time. I'm jealous of the old girls, the nice ones. I'm jealous of Dorry because she's better-looking than I am. But I'm not jealous of Maida Means. I just don't like her and I'm all through wiping her runny nose for her."

He laughed. He laughed a long time. But he kept his arms around me. "Tuesday I ship out. You haven't told me what you want for a souvenir."

"I don't want any souvenirs. I think they're silly. If there's anything I want to remember, I can remember it without a string around my finger. But if you could find Larry . . . it would be . . ."

"Don't cry, Honey. It isn't your turn."

"It certainly is my turn!" I said indignantly. "I did it first at Pinky's and then you did it by the brook and it certainly is my turn! But I'm not going to cry. . . . Didn't anybody ever have a nickname for you? Something silly and short and sweet?"

"No. Can you think of one?"

"No, I can't. But darling, Steve darling, try to find him. Try to find out where he is. I can't tell you how sad we are. I can't tell you what an awful feeling hangs over us all the time. We don't say a

word about it. We smile and talk and go on doing things, but I can't tell you how we feel inside."

"I know, darling. I'll try. I'll try my damnedest." He patted my eyes with his handkerchief. "If I'm shot down and let myself get chucked into a prison camp over there, will you promise to feel bad about me, too?"

"No, I won't! I shan't feel at all bad. I'll just think you're a darned sight safer where you are than over here with Maida charging a heavy brigade at you."

You see how it was? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Just kidding . . . except that I knew he would try to get word about Larry.

On Monday night, Steve's last night, Mrs. Delafield invited us over there for dinner, just our family and Slim, so Steve wouldn't be the only young man. We took the car and Father didn't open his mouth about coupons.

I remembered what Steve had told me about Doris. I kept one eye on her. He was right. She stood up, or sat up, very straight whenever she spoke to him and her eyes were level against his. I looked at her hands. She never did any fussy fidgeting with her hands. But I noticed how long and pointed the nails were; I noticed the lithe strength of her slender fingers. I could hardly keep from laughing. If anybody tried to hurt me I was perfectly capable of doing my own clawing!

Steve's eyes had followed mine to Dorry's hands. When I looked back at him our glances met. We both laughed.

"What are you laughing at?" Doris said suddenly.

"You," Steve said promptly. "You're our favorite source of amusement. I can't understand why all the funniness in your family is wrapped up in you. There isn't anything at all funny about Cherry."

The first part of the evening was a mess. Everybody began calling up, asking for Steve, wanting to tell him good-by. He cut them off pretty short. He thanked them for having been so wonderful to him and said he's be seeing them again. Maida called. He cut her shorter than anybody else but he was polite enough. He put his hand over the transmitter and said to me, "Uh—any tender word for your girl friend?"

"All the words I can think of are too profane for Mother's ears," I said tartly.

He left the receiver off the hook after that, so things went better.

"I notice you left the receiver on until you got her," I said when I had a chance to make a remark without everybody being all ears.

"Did it on purpose. I couldn't bear to leave without seeing one more jealous twinge."

The rest of the evening they talked mostly about Larry. It all sounded very complicated to me. Steve said that all the occupied countries had underground roots in England. People were spirited in in some way, with messages, to make reports, to pick up supplies of different kinds, and then they were spirited away again. He said all they could do, he and his outfit, was to ask everybody to keep asking about Larry and it would take time.

Mother and Dad were excited and pleased. Mother had been a little off the line since that night of Dorry's party but she thawed perceptibly. There certainly are advantages to having friends who are sons of your mother's friends.

Mrs. Delafield asked if I would like to stay all night and go with her to take him to the train at five. I didn't want to.

When we were ready to leave Steve said, looking at Mother, "Don't you think Cherry needs exercise? I think she ought to walk home. She's too young to let her figure get ahead of her like this! I'll walk with her, of course; I know she can't be trusted out alone."

Mother hesitated. She gave me a really mean look. But she didn't want to hurt Mrs. Delafield's feelings.

"We'll walk too," Doris said helpfully. "It's a lovely evening, Mother."

"Well, all right," Mother said reluctantly. "But see that you bring her home with you."

Doris laughed gaily. "The way Mother talks you'd think Cherry was some kind of gypsy! She's been underfoot ever since I can remember but Mother's always expecting her not to get home."

Nobody said anything. Mother and Dad got in the car and drove off.

"Well, start marking time," Doris said briskly. "Left, right, left, right . . ."

"Oh no, you don't," Steve said. "We were in front the last time! Lieutenant, lead off!"

Slim laughed. "I knew I wouldn't get rid of you before you began pulling rank on me. Come on, Dorry."

"You see that you get home by the time we do," Doris said firmly, "or I'll send Skivar after you."

"We can handle Skivar," Steve said. "I'm not afraid of Skivar. It's your fingernails that keep me worried."

So we walked home. I couldn't help laughing—Doris and Slim trudging along in front, and I, as grown-up as anybody, behind them with Steve. He didn't laugh. He held my hand in his, up inside his arm. When we came to the last corner before we turned into our block he stopped and put his arms around me.

He said, "Good-by, Cherry."

"You aren't gone yet," I said.

"Yes, I'm gone. Good-by."

I said, "Good-by, Steve."

He kissed me. Kissing was better than I thought. He kissed me several times.

Then we went on. Dorry and Slim were waiting for us on the front porch. Slim had his arms around her. We stood there for a minute or two. Steve held both my hands. He didn't kiss them but he didn't let them go. He said good-by to Doris and then said, "Lead off, Lieutenant."

Slim laughed and saluted. "Okay, Captain. Here we go."

Mother and Dad were still up. I noticed that they acted polite and unnatural. Dad patted me on the shoulder and said next time he had to go to New York on business he would take me along and let me give myself a time. When we went upstairs, Doris came into my room and gave me a beautiful bottle of very expensive perfume someone had given her for Christmas. Not Slim! She wouldn't give away a postal card if Slim had given it to her. Mother came in, in her dressing gown, her best one, and sat on the side of my bed and talked quite a while. She talked mostly about how young I was. Gosh, I knew how young I was!

I didn't feel bad. There was a war on and I could hardly wait for Steve to get back and begin looking for Larry. They seemed down-

right cold-blooded to me, talking about trips to New York and perfume when Steve could begin looking for Larry as soon as he got back over. But I was glad Dorry gave me the perfume.

Mother kissed me when she went out. I was relieved when she was gone. I went to sleep almost right away. I didn't sleep very well though. I kept waking up. Every time I wakened I turned on the light and looked at the clock. One. One-thirty. Two. Two-thirty. Three. Three-thirty. At four I was wide awake. The train would leave at five. I had done so many wrong things, you'd have thought the mischief was all out of me by that time, but it wasn't. I was very wide awake. I thought it would be fun to sneak out by myself and pop down to the train and wave him off.

I laughed all the time I was dressing. I was very quiet. Half the fun of doing it was pulling another fast one on the family. But I dressed carefully and doused myself with Dorry's perfume and used more lipstick than Mother considers quite ladylike for high school girls.

I stumbled over Skivar, the brute, going downstairs. He used to sleep in Larry's room but after he left Skivar had adopted the top of the stairs where nobody could possibly miss him. If a dog ever loved being cursed at, it was Skivar. And do the best I could, I couldn't make him stay in the house. Every time I opened the door a crack, the first thing out was his big nose. So I had to let him go.

I ran most of the way and Skivar loved that. I was all out of breath by the time I reached the station. The train was already in. Mrs. Delafield was standing there and Steve was on the steps. He saw me first. He bounded off the steps and kissed me.

"Bumpers up, I hope! You're going to catch it again. Of all the indecent hours!"

He kissed me again.

"Don't forget not to die unless you have to," I said speaking very fast, still out of breath. "If we're worth dying for, we've almost got to be worth living for and . . . try anyhow."

"I'll try."

He swung back up to the steps. The conductor said something. Somebody waved a lantern.

It was eerie and rather awesome but I was glad I was there. Mrs.

Delafield hadn't said a word. She took hold of my hand. Steve stood on the steps, waving. We waved too. But we didn't say anything. The train pulled out. Still we stood there, not speaking. We looked down the track where the train had gone.

"Thank you, Cherry," Mrs. Delafield said. "That was sweet of you. I thought you were . . . letting me down. You couldn't let me down, could you? Come on home with me and we'll have a little breakfast."

"I don't want any breakfast," I said. "Do you feel a little sick at the tummy? I do. Because it's so early, I suppose. I'm—I'm just full."

"I'll drive you home."

"I'd rather run with Skivar if you don't mind. It's a lovely morning. I'm glad it's a lovely morning. Aren't you glad it's a lovely morning?"

"Is it? I hadn't noticed. . . . Run then, Cherry. Run if you want to. But don't think you can outrun life! Because you can't!"

So I ran off toward home with Skivar. I felt fine.

Gosh, the war certainly does things to you. I had confidently expected to sneak back to bed and not say a word and then just laugh up my sleeve at the things they didn't know. But the whole family was up. They were in the dining room eating breakfast and it wasn't six o'clock. So I made a clean breast of it. There wasn't much else I could do. I said I couldn't sleep and so Skivar and I went down to the station to see him off.

Father cleared his throat. Mother shoved the inevitable orange juice at me.

"Was anybody there?" Doris asked.

"No. Nobody. Just Mrs. Delafield."

"What did he say?"

"He didn't say anything. There wasn't time. He just said he wouldn't die if he could help it."

"He said . . . wasn't that rather an odd thing to say?"

"It didn't seem odd. Maybe it would have seemed odd but he was answering me. I told him not to if he could help it. And he said he wouldn't. That's all."

I went to school that day. Mother said I could stay home if I wanted to but I didn't want to. But . . . and there's another of those

things you can't understand and if you can't understand them yourself how can you explain them? I didn't feel like part of my own crowd any more. They all looked so young. Even Junie and Artie looked young.

"It's because I've been going around with that big crowd so much," I told myself. "It'll wear off."

But I hadn't been with the big crowd very much. I hadn't been invited. "It's because Dorry let Slim kiss her before me. That makes me feel older."

I didn't like it very well. One had to be part of a crowd and the big crowd didn't want me. I didn't want them either. I didn't want anybody.

Mrs. Delafield telephoned that afternoon and asked me, as a special favor, to come and have dinner with her. She said she was lonesome. I didn't care at all about going but I couldn't very well refuse. She brought out a lot of Steve's baby pictures and we looked at them. He looked just as silly as Larry and Doris and I looked in our baby pictures. He would have been furious if he had known we were looking at them and saying how cute he was. But he wasn't any cuter than anybody else at that age.

Parents are certainly dopes about some things. She had a box of papers, pictures he had cut out when he couldn't cut, things he had painted when he couldn't paint, things he had pasted when he couldn't paste. They were just like the things Mother fished out now and then, things Larry had done before he could use his hands. I looked at them to please her and said, "How cute!" I could hardly keep from laughing. I wished I could have a television of Steve's face if he had a television of us doing it. But you have to humor parents.

Two days later when I got home from school there was a package for me on the mail tray. It contained an enameled jewel box, though I didn't have any jewels, and inside was a little bit of a wrist watch with a card from Steve. It said, "I shall never waste any more precious fifteen minutes." So I knew he was thinking of the night I timed him on Dorry's watch.

The watch was beautiful. Mother didn't say anything but her eyebrows went way up. When Doris came she examined it carefully and it was she who found the fine engraving inside the lid.

Honey,  
watch the time for my safe return.

Dad frowned over it. "How do you know it is for you? It hasn't got your name on it."

"It was addressed to me," I said defensively. "And Honey is what he calls me. Not all the time of course. Part of the time he calls me Squirt because that's what Larry calls me. He says Squirt very fast almost like a grunt. But he says Honey in two syllables."

"How else could he say it? Honey is two syllables."

"Yes, but—" But I couldn't tell them how he said it. He dawdled over it so it was almost three syllables.

"Those are diamonds in that watch," Doris said. "It looks to me like a very expensive present."

"The point is, does it tell time?" I was still defensive.

"Why shouldn't it tell time?"

"Because if they are phony diamonds it probably tells phony time. I wouldn't put it past him to do a thing like that."

I was glad to have the watch. I wore it to bed that night but I was careful about throwing my arms around. It kept me awake most of the night.

Artie caught up with me on the way to school next morning.

"Now that your personal, private insigne has shoved off," he said unpleasantly, "how about the movie Saturday night?"

"Insigne, personal, private and otherwise, is the least of my worries," I said coldly. "But I'd like to go to the movie."

So it was a date.

But when he tried to hold my hand as usual, I didn't like it. It was nothing against Artie. Maybe I was just nervous. But I didn't want to be touched.

"What's the matter?" he whispered fiercely when I pulled my hand away. "Are you still calf-eyed over a couple of little blobs of ribbon?"

"I'm not calf-eyed over anything," I whispered back, just as fiercely. "If I don't want to be touched I don't want to be touched. That's all. If you don't want to look at the movie, we'll go home."

He was very sulky. The movie was foul, too.

The days worried along. Slim left the first week in June. He wasn't sent overseas, just down to Florida. He was safe enough there but he couldn't get home for week-end dates. Doris didn't say a word; she just took it. I would have thought Steve was wrong and she wasn't in love at all, but I remembered she had let him kiss her. *Before me.*

We came along into June and school was out again. Doris graduated that year. They didn't make much fuss over it. They graduated and then they went to work at Du Pont's or Picatinny. Doris didn't splurge on clothes any more. She bought war bonds.

It was in July. I had been downtown buying something. The mail was on the tray in the hall and I ran through it. Mother's hands always shook when she got the mail. She was always hoping there would be something from Larry but there never was. We got lots of V-mail. We were conscientious about writing to all our friends in the service because they said over the radio that it was important, and we got answers in return. Most of them weren't very interesting. I suppose our letters weren't very interesting either. But we kept on writing.

There were three for me and I took them on up to my room. I sat down and looked them over. One had "Major S. Delafield" in the corner. I sat there and looked at it. "Major S. Delafield." Steve was Mrs. Delafield's son so his initial had to be S but he was no Major. "Major S. Delafield" did not sound at all like him. It irritated me.

"Darn the Army anyhow," I thought. "If he is trying to pull rank on me he can go to the dickens. He can go to Maida Means if he wants to! Major S. Delafield!"

I had a notion not to open it. I had a notion to throw it into the waste basket. I had a notion to tear it up and throw the scraps out the window. I am glad I didn't. I read the other letters first. Nothing in them. I opened Major S. Delafield's.

"Honey: I mean, Squirt. I am not going to keep you in suspense a minute. He is all right. He was not wounded and he is not sick. He is in a prison camp inside Germany. You were right about him, everybody likes him. They like him there.

"I told you I was a flop. I cannot even lie to my own advantage. I should like to say that I flew over alone and singlehanded, made a

round of prison camps and picked him out by some kind of aerial legerdemain. But I didn't. I really had nothing to do with it. Mostly it was luck. All I did was to tell everybody who came across anybody who was going over there, or had come from there, to get everyone asking for news of him. Presumably picked up in North Africa. Could be any place, Italy, France, any of the occupied countries. They move prisoners around a good deal, usually shoving them back farther from the front, but I tried to keep everybody asking.

"In the end it was so simple I am disgusted. I can't tell you exactly how things work. In fact, I do not know myself. But some refugees are not refugees, but spies. Some enemy spies, seeking information. Some our spies, bringing news. Some prisoners of war are so intentionally. It's all tied up with the various undergrounds. I have no connection with it myself but I kept hounding everybody to keep hounding everybody else.

"About an hour ago H.Q. phoned and said they had a Frenchman down there who had something I wanted. There is only one thing I want and I knew he couldn't have it. But I was not busy so I went down. Carefully eliminating names and details, he has been in the same camp and remembered the name. He said, 'That one, they like him.' So your description fitted. Eventually this man expects to land there again and I told him to tell *him* you are all fine and pulling hard for him. He has not been long in that camp, which is probably why you have not heard.

"He is well and in good spirits but burnt up at being stuck there. Get your Red Cross to get busy through Geneva. Am I kicking myself all around the field! This one little thing I couldn't do for you myself!

"They gave me a step when I came back. I tried to talk them into a blue cornflower but the oak leaf was the best they would do for me.—Don't forget to remember."

I read it several times before I came to my senses and realized it was something Mother ought to know. I got up and shook myself and went downstairs. I didn't say anything. I held it out to her.

Mother read the first line and then she screamed. Then she began crying. Then she began reading it out loud. I knew it by heart. She laughed and cried and kissed me and then she rushed to the phone to tell Dad but he had already left the office. She called Mrs. Delafield

and told her, crying all the time, and when Dad came we read the letter again and by that time we were all crying. I was glad when Doris got home.

"I told you he was all right!" she said. "I told you!"

I don't know how she felt on the inside and I can't really describe how the rest of us felt. If you've ever had anybody you loved very much and were almost sure he was dead, but kept forcing yourself to say hotly he was not dead, he *couldn't* be dead!—but inside you still thought he was—and then suddenly, like that, you knew he wasn't—well, that's how we felt.

Mother called up the Red Cross and they promised to swing into action immediately and told us what he would like best to have and also what we could send him and we all spent the whole evening writing letters to him. Dad called Mr. Andrews, the editor of the paper, and told him about it—although we knew very little to tell—and then telephone calls began coming in from his friends and our friends, and we all felt wonderful. It was as good as an armistice. It was an armistice. I almost forgave the Germans for being Nazis, I was so glad they had only captured and not killed him.

Within two or three days Doris and all the old girls got nice notes from Steve, thanking them for being so grand to him and whatnot. I didn't get one. I didn't care. I didn't care if I never heard from him again. He had promised to look for Larry and he had found him and I was satisfied.

Maida called up. She would. Dorry wasn't there so she talked to me. She said she had the sweetest letter from Steve—he was a major now. She said if Dorry wanted to write him, his APO number was so and so. I thanked her sweetly and said I would not forget to tell Doris. I did not mention the watch. I did not tell her it was Steve's persistent nosing around that had got us news of Larry. I was on my apple-pie Number One behavior.

Several days later I got a letter from him. It was one of those skimpy things, not V-mail, but just one thin page sent by air.

"Cherry: It is raining like Billy-be-damned and thank God for that because they won't be pushing us out and over today. In fact, we just got in from the last push-off.

Then I read the letter. It wasn't long—I didn't expect it to be long because he hadn't any more to write about than I had but usually he used more words. This one was extremely short.

"Honey, this time they gave me the works. They shelled it out to me and how! I'm still getting the merry run-around in the hospital but as soon as I'm in shipping order, I'll be shipped home. Do you know what home is? It isn't a country. It isn't a town. It isn't Mother's nice big house. It's you. So I'm to be shipped home. I may be short a couple of legs. So many legs less to get muscle-bound. Soul and spirit will be left me and you're the precious little Squirt to keep the kinks out of them. And chalk this up to my credit: I tried to stay alive. I stayed alive enough to get back to base."

I read it several times.

It was a cruel letter. "It serves you right," I told myself. "You had no business getting mixed up with him in the first place. You just let Mrs. Delafield talk you into it and it serves you right."

Mother called up to me but I didn't answer.

"Nobody in the world has a right to write such a cruel letter to anybody. I wouldn't even take it from Doris! I don't think I'd take it from Larry. I don't think . . ."

So I got up and went downstairs. I didn't seem to be walking on stairsteps. I seemed to be walking on the air. But it was heavy air. It pushed back against my feet.

"Mother," I said, "I can't . . . get rid of him. He's all tied up with me somehow."

"Yes, I know, dear. You mean Steve, don't you?"

"If I could just . . . get rid of him . . ."

I gave her the letter.

"Ah, Sweet!" she said. "I'm sorry. Come and sit down, Cherry. We have to take so much. I don't know how we take it. But we have to and so we can! Cherry!"

We sat down and looked at each other. I felt like a stranger. I felt far away from her—and from that house.

"I'm going to call Gorge," Mother said. "Maybe he told her more."

Mrs. Delafield was crying. She said she had a letter from him. He had been pretty badly wounded but was safe back in England, in the hospital; he would be sent home when he was able to travel. Mother didn't say anything about maybe he wouldn't have any legs when he got home. She asked her to come over and have dinner with us at seven and Mrs. Delafield said she would.

Mother had no more than hung up when the doorbell rang. I didn't make a move to answer it.

"He's probably dead," I thought. "If he's dead . . . I'll never be rid of him . . . never. . . ."

Mother went to the door. It was a letter from Larry, a long letter with only a few phrases cut out. He said he felt fine and the food was very good but he didn't see much chance of getting to be a general where he was stuck right then. He said he was getting a lot of attention because "some fool in England" had everybody asking about him and he was getting candy and cigarettes from unknown sources and he'd be darned if he thought the world was as black as it was painted.

Mother and I laughed and cried and hugged each other and Mother tried to get Dad on the phone to tell him but again he had left the office. We read the letter again.

"That 'fool in England' must be Steve," Mother said.

"He certainly is," I said.

Dad came and we read the letter again and hugged each other and Mother cried and Dad cleared his throat and wiped his glasses. Doris came and we went through it again.

"I told you he was all right," Doris said. "I told you."

Just telling us wasn't enough. We needed that letter. We needed the feeling of Larry back of it.

When a car pulled up to the curb Doris glanced out the window and said, "Why, there's Mrs. Delafield!"

"Oh, good heavens!" Mother said. "I invited her for dinner!" And then she said, "Darlings, it isn't all good news we had today. We had some bad news, too. Cherry had bad news. Steve was badly hurt in some kind of a flight; he's expecting to be shipped home pretty soon."

Dad and Doris looked a little sorry and shocked. I knew they were putting it on to please me. They were too happy about Larry to be sorry and shocked about anything else. And I didn't blame them a bit. I was happy about Larry, too. . . . Or almost happy.

Mrs. Delafield looked surprised when she came in and found us laughing and hugging one another, but Mother told her about Larry and we read the letter again. She was pleased, too.

"I forgot about dinner, Gorge," Mother said. "I'll see what I can dig out of tin cans."

"Let me do it, Helen. I can work culinary wonders with a can opener."

They went out to the kitchen together. We could hear Mother quoting things from Larry's letter.

"Come over here and sit in my lap, Sugar puss," Doris said.

We laughed at that, because I was almost as big as she. But I went over and sat in her lap.

"Is he badly hurt?" I gave her the letter. "We have to pray about that, Cherry. Miracles do happen, you know. We must pray hard."

"They've probably . . . cut them off . . . by this time," I said.

"We'll pray about it. Remember it's the same Steve—soul and spirit. He says so himself. It isn't going to make any difference if he is . . . a little lame."

She put her head against my shoulder and closed her eyes. I tried to pray, too. I couldn't pray. All I could say was "God—God—God—"

"We don't have to ask anything," Doris whispered. "He knows what we want."

When Mrs. Delafield announced that tin cans were being served in the dining room we went in as if nothing had happened. Doris asked the blessing. "More than for food," she said, "we thank You that the two men we love so much are both living and will be coming home to us sometime. Amen."

Mother had Larry's letter beside her plate and kept glancing at it and giving it fond little touches and reading a sentence or two aloud, although we knew every word of it. We did not talk about

Steve; just about Larry. I was as happy as they were about Larry.

When I was in bed Doris came into my room and slithered under the covers with me. We hadn't slept together since we were children and used to sneak into each other's rooms because it was against the rules. Sometimes Larry sneaked in after us, pretending to scold us, and ended up by bringing cookies from the kitchen for all of us. Sometimes Dorry and I went together into his room and though he tried to order us out we knew he didn't mean it and refused to leave. Sometimes we all went to sleep there together.

"You feel so cool, Doris," I said. "It was very warm, that other night. Skivar was like a bake oven pushing into my back and Steve was warm, too, on the other side." I stopped then, remembered she did not know about that night. She did not ask questions. She had her arm around me. She still felt cool.

"Why don't you cry, Cherry? Cry! Cry hard!"

"I don't want to cry."

"I do!" she said. "I'm going to cry and cry hard! But don't be worried, Cherry. It isn't because I am afraid of anything—I know everything is all right and the way it has to be—but I feel very sorry and I'm going to cry!"

She began to cry.

"Dorry," I said, "did you ever see a man cry?"

"I've seen them . . . have tears in their eyes," she said. "I haven't really seen them cry. Did you ever see one cry, Cherry? Not Father!"

"Steve," I said. And then I cried too. We must have looked a mess but nobody could see us.

"Will you stay all night with me, Dorry?" I asked.

"Yes, of course. That's what I came for."

And we went on crying.

For the first time I was really glad that she had become religious. Say what you like, religion—even somebody else's religion—is a wonderful thing to have around when your heart is torn to tatters and you are sad enough to die. I kept telling myself that now we had heard from Larry I shouldn't be sad at all, just happy. But I was sad enough to die.

## XI

"How's ~~THE~~ gas situation, Dad?" Mother asked when we were at breakfast. "Do we dare squander a couple of gallons? I'm going to keep Cherry home from school and she might practice up on her driving a little."

"A fine idea—do you both good," Dad said heartily. "Go to some nice place and blow yourselves to a good luncheon. On me!" He tossed a ten-dollar bill on the table.

When he had gone Mother and I did a few things around the house, washed the dishes, made up the beds, emptied the ash receivers. I wrote a note to Steve, a small note. I was careful about it. I wanted it to sound friendly but not lugubrious. I wrote:

"Come home, darling, just come home. Come quickly. I'll do your jitterbugging and dogtrotting from this on. But hurry up. The worst thing about this war is, it's so darned slow."

We drove by the post office and I put an airmail stamp on. Then I drove out the country way that Steve and I had walked.

"That's where we went to sleep the night of Dorry's party," I said. "Up that bank under the tree. The apple blossoms were out."

When we came to the bridge over the creek I pulled off beside the road and stopped the car. "That's the brook he said was spouting sermons. That's where we stopped to rest. It was under that willow he cried so hard and I walked down the creek and gathered flowers. Was it only last spring? It seems forever ago."

"Only last spring, Cherry. But a lot of water has gone under this bridge, and under all our bridges, since last spring."

When we reached the Carey farmhouse I said, "That's where we had the chicken dinner. Do you mind waiting in the car a minute while I run in?"

"Do you mind if I go in with you? I'd like to meet them."

Martin was off working somewhere but Mamie and the children and the dogs were there. I introduced them to Mother.

"When's the Captain coming home?" the children chorused.

"Soon I think. Soon I hope."

"Cherry and I are taking the day off," Mother said. "We're trying to get ourselves back in tune with the Infinite."

Mamie didn't say anything, just looked at her with quiet, questioning eyes.

"The war news crowded up on us yesterday," Mother explained. "We heard that my son Larry, who has been missing in action a long time, is safe and well in a prison camp in Germany. And we heard that Steve, Major Delafield, has been badly injured and is in a hospital in England. All of it coming together played havoc with our nerves and hearts."

"I feel so sorry for people who haven't learned how to turn their hearts and nerves over to the Lord," Mamie said. "I don't know how they can stand so many terrible things."

"I don't either," Mother said. "It took me a long time to learn, but thank God I learned in time. I never could have stood all those weeks of hearing—nothing."

"Is the Captain—did you say major? Is he a major now?—is he badly injured? We love him so much. The children adore him."

"Yes, he's a major. We don't know how badly he's injured. When we find out we'll let you know. He expects to be sent home to . . . to recuperate."

Mamie wanted us to stay for dinner but we didn't. We drove a long way into the country, drove slowly, and stopped at a quiet crossroads inn for luncheon. When we reached home the telephone was ringing and Mother went to answer it.

"Yes, Dad. Yes, we just came in. . . . Oh! . . . No, it hasn't come yet. . . . Yes, I will, Dad, thanks. . . . Bye."

I stood there waiting.

"It was Dad. He'll be along soon."

"What hasn't come yet?" I asked. I suppose I thought maybe there had been another, more sinister message.

She hesitated.

"I can take it," I said.

"Well, you just have to take it, Cherry. Dad says there is quite a story about Steve in the paper. It's in all the papers. It seems he's turned out a hero. His picture is in and Dad was afraid if you came on it suddenly—it might shock you."

"Nothing could shock me. Not anything. If he came right in the door this minute—in a wheel chair—it wouldn't shock me a bit."

It was a wonderful story about Steve. It was a little complicated but it sounded just like him, foolish and heroic. It seems the fighter planes go over in squadrons. Each squadron has a leader and the others take orders from him by a kind of telephone arrangement in the planes. Steve, as a major, was leader of his squadron.

They met more interception than usual, not only from other planes but from the antiaircraft guns. But they went on. They downed a lot of planes but they had to keep fighting. And Steve ran out of ammunition. He telephoned to the others and they were out too, so he told them to come on and beat it for home. His own plane was already riddled with flak, and so was he. Flak is the same as shrapnel, but when it is in the air they call it flak.

So they got into their formation and started back toward England and suddenly a big Messerschmitt zoomed up and headed straight at them.

Steve telephoned the squadron to fly high and keep out of the road.

"I'm going to ram him," Steve said. "I'm busted wide open anyhow. Take them on in, Captain Ward, and take them fast."

And he went for the Messerschmitt. It tried to dodge him. The paper said, "But there's no dodging a flying fool hell-bent for suicide."

They tangled. They turned over and over, going down. And then suddenly up came Steve in his battered old P38 and got back into the formation.

"Nice going, Major," Captain Ward radioed. "Are you badly damaged?"

Steve, the darned fool, laughed. "We're so bashed-up, Wardie, I don't know which is me and which is 38. If we start diving, let us go. Take them in and hurry."

"Okay, Steve."

Steve began to lag behind and when they neared the base, Captain Ward noticed that no messages were going out, either to the squadron or to the field. So he took over. He told the squadron to get in as quickly as they could and to leave a wide berth for Steve, not knowing whether he could make the landing at all.

Steve's plane slid in somehow, some time after the others, and they were all there waiting for him. The plane fell to pieces and Steve fell with it. It was his own men who pulled him out of the wreckage.

"Steve, you damn fool, don't you ever put me through that again!" Captain Ward said, and then he fainted and they got him to the hospital ahead of Steve. Captain Ward had a lot of flak in him, too. They all had flak in them. Steve, according to AP, had been stepped up to a Lieutenant-Colonelcy. It was his seventeenth certain plane downed, with plenty of additional credits to his account.

I was furious.

"You must be proud of him, Cherry," Mother said.

"I am not! I'm not proud of him at all. I think he's a perfect dunce! I just wish I could get my hands on him!"

Dad and Doris came, arms full of papers, for it was in all the big New York papers, too. They both said, Wasn't I proud of him?

But I wasn't. "And he's a liar, too," I said. "He promised to be careful. Do you call that being careful?—Well, I don't. I don't see anything careful about it. He's not only a fool, he is a plain liar."

All of Dorry's crowd called up that night. They talked to her. They said, wasn't it wonderful, and Dorry said, yes, wasn't it wonderful. And they said to be a lieutenant colonel at his age, wasn't it wonderful? And Doris said it certainly was. They said who would ever have dreamed he would turn out to be a hero, wasn't it wonderful? And Doris said it was wonderful.

There was one call for me. It was Artie Williams. "Oh, listen, Cherry, maybe I ought to apologize. He did all right, didn't he?"

"If that's what you call all right, yes, he did. It's not what I call all right, by any means."

"I was just thinking though—if he wanted to commit suicide, why didn't he go ahead and do it?"

"I wish he had!" I said.

I didn't really wish it. I just wished he could get home. I kept thinking of his plane riddled with flak; him, too. He had said there were things worth dying for and he had promised to try to live for the same things. But he hadn't tried. You couldn't just go up in the air and ram a Messerschmitt if you were trying to live!

We had been hearing from Larry in the prison camp quite regularly. He did not say much. If he had said anything important we would not have received the letters. We wrote to him through the Red Cross in Geneva and sent him everything they said was permissible. And then suddenly we didn't hear from him at all. I don't think we worried much. We thought maybe they had tightened up the regulations or the mail had gone astray. We went on writing and sending things.

The next news we had of him came from Steve in England.

"Tell your mother she may not be hearing from *him* for a while. He and a couple of others made a slick getaway from where they were. They are being spirited out somehow. It's a slow and ticklish business so tell her not to worry if she doesn't hear for quite a while."

Escaping was very dangerous. We knew that. We had seen pictures of men who had escaped; emaciated, gaunt and haggard. Now Larry was escaping. He would look like those men in the pictures, unshaved, half-starved.

"He's all right," Doris said confidently. "Larry's all right. He isn't alone, you know."

But we didn't feel at all happy about it.

We agreed not to tell anybody he was getting out. We remembered all the posters about the enemy having ears and we certainly didn't want them to know about Larry. Mother kept on writing to him. She addressed the letters to his old APO number. She said he was sure to head back to his outfit.

And there we were, just waiting again.

Out of a clear sky it happened. I had been writing something to Steve every day, not much, just a line or two, but he said he got a kick out of them so I kept writing. I never asked a thing about his legs. I heard from him once in a while.

We were sitting there and the telephone rang. Dad was at the desk so he answered it. Slim was still in camp in Florida so Doris didn't pay any more attention to the phone than if it was just Skivar barking for something.

Dad said, "Hello.... Yes.... It's for you, Cherry."

"Who is it?" I didn't care about the phone any more either.

"He didn't say. Some mouthy swain."

I took the receiver and said, "Hello." I said it very curtly because I didn't care about any of the movies. And the telephone said:

"Hi ya, Honey."

I held the receiver off as far as I could get it. I looked at it. I shook it.

"Are you there, Squirt? Or has the cat got your tongue?"

I said, "Where—are—you?"

Dad got up from the desk and Doris shoved the chair under me. I sat down hard.

"You don't seem as loquacious as I vaguely remember."

"Where—are—you!"

"Halloran, Honey. It's not a night club. It's a hospital. Got in last night. Big convoy."

"How are you?"

"Fine. Fit as a fiddle. Honey, those sulfa drugs are really something! They're shoving the Bible hard for top notch in miracles. . . . I'm fine. How are you?"

"Terrible. Just terrible. Just like always."

"That's swell. Just what I was hoping for."

I looked at the receiver again. "Does your mother know you're home?"

"Yes, I phoned her. I was going to ask her to throttle you and bring you in tomorrow for a couple of polite little visiting hours. But, Honey, I tell you it pays to be a hero. I've talked myself into three full days at the expense of the taxpayers. Tell your father to start groaning."

"Just three days?"

"Oh, I'll get a leave later on. But three days starting tomorrow is what counts right now! I hope you have a lot of heavy dates on so I can do a little wolf-hunting. Three nights, Honey!"

"All three nights? Maida isn't going to like it."

"It's tough on me, too. I'm getting the train that lands me up there at eleven-five. Will you be at your ABC's?"

"No, I'll stay home. Can you travel alone—or will you have to bring a nurse or somebody with you?"

"Having had a look at the nurses, darling, I think I'll come alone. They're all right. They know their stuff. But they certainly contribute nothing to the scenery."

I couldn't think of a thing to say. I felt a perfect fool.

"I suppose you haven't heard from Larry?" he said.

"No."

"He was okay the last I heard. They were hiding out in a respectable Catholic church. They were really stuck there. The old women were smuggling food into them under their shawls and leaving it under the pews when they said their prayers. I don't know where they got the food. The three of them were together—they were shooting craps between Masses. I suppose the poor old popes are doing somersaults in their ivory vaults."

"Why didn't you tell us you were coming home?"

"Couldn't. I'm the War Department's pet secret."

"Did they get all the flak out of you?"

"Not all. They left enough for me to remember them by. I'm a battle-scarred old veteran. Older, too. I'm two thousand and twenty-four. Will you come to the train?"

"Do you want me to?"

"Well, I must be as moronic as you so frequently tell me, but I'd rather admire to see a couple of squinty little eyes and a red nose. You probably won't recognize me. If I can find it, I'll be wearing a blue cornflower on my blood-stained blouse. . . . What do you mean, another thirty-five cents?" This was to the telephone operator. "I haven't talked a minute and a half. I haven't said anything yet. I haven't even told her I love her. . . . Well, good-by, Honey. I've done all I can afford for A. T. and T."

I said "Good-by."

I put the receiver on the hook. Mother and Dad and Doris were all standing back of me. I slid off the chair onto the floor. You'd have

thought I was one of those females of the Victorian era who went around swooning at the slightest provocation.

When I came to, I was lying on the couch. Mother was patting a cold cloth on my face. Doris had a piece of ice on my wrist. Dad just stood there, looking useless and out of place.

"The trouble with our times is that we never have a chance to catch our breath," Doris said cheerfully. "Everything happens like a stroke of lightning. We have to give ourselves a new gearing-up every ten minutes."

"Larry was all right the last he heard," I said. "He and those other two were stuck in a Catholic church. They were shooting craps between services. The women smuggled food into them under their shawls."

"Did they have to do any . . . amputating?" Dad asked carefully.

"He didn't say. I didn't ask. He said the sulfa drugs are wonderful."

I sat up. Mother stayed on the couch with me and Dad and Doris sat down. We looked at one another. We acted almost like strangers. Polite but formal.

Mrs. Delafield called up later and talked to Mother. Her voice was high and excited and the rest of us could hear every word.

"Did he say anything about . . . his condition?" Mother asked.

"No. Did he tell Cherry anything?"

"No."

She said she would come by and pick me up to go to the train with her.

"Why don't you come over here tonight, Gorge, and stay with us?" Mother said. "Do you feel nervous?"

"No, I feel wonderful. I'm going to wash my hair, Helen. I'm trying to get rid of that damned dye."

Mother laughed. "I'm still trying to digest the bitter fruit myself. I'm going to grow old gracefully from now on, Steve and I together. But I'm glad I did it that time! It was so educational!"

We sat there. Mother didn't say a word about homework or going to bed. She went to the kitchen and made some hot chocolate and some little sandwiches and we sat there.

"It doesn't make a bit of difference about his legs," Doris said. "It's the same old soul, the same old spirit. He said so himself. . . . Did he say anything about his decorations, Cherry? They say he's really in line for the tops. Maybe you should have congratulated him."

I knew she was trying to make talk.

"I didn't think of it," I said, trying to rise to her good example. "And don't you think for a minute that I feel heroic or noble about anything either, because I don't. I'd a lot rather have him . . . all together in one piece than wearing some silly medal on . . . what's left of him."

"But you wouldn't want him . . . not to do what he did, Cherry," Mother said. "You wouldn't want that."

"Yes, I'd want that! Well, maybe I wouldn't quite want that. I don't know what I want. I certainly didn't want him to do it. I wish he hadn't had the chance to do it. I wish it hadn't been forced on him."

"But it wasn't forced on him," Doris said. "He did it himself."

"You must feel proud of him, Cherry!" Mother said. "I know you're nervous and worried, but deep down in your heart you can't help feeling proud of him."

"I'm not a bit proud of him," I said. "He had enough planes already. It was somebody else's turn. I'm ashamed of him and I'm going to tell him so."

"I'm proud of him!" Dad said suddenly. "I'm proud that he's our friend—and likes one of our girls. I'm proud of Larry, too, making his getaway from that camp and hiding out, shooting craps and eating smuggled food in that little church waiting for a chance to get along back to his own job and his own outfit. I'm proud of both of them. I look up to them. I respect them from the bottom of my heart. Respect—that's what it is. Respect and pride. You might say reverence."

"I know just how you feel, Dad," Mother said. "But I think it's a little different with women. I know how Cherry feels. I was always proud of Larry. I was proud because he was good at school and because he was handsome and popular and gay and clean. But now I wouldn't care if he was a perfect dud at his job; I wouldn't care if he was ugly and had a foul disposition—I just want to get him home,

where I can get hold of him—even if I spank him! Women feel things differently, I think."

You see how we were? Not like ourselves. We were saying things we would never have dreamed of saying in ordinary times. But the times weren't ordinary.

"I hope you don't think I'm in love with him," I said. I could hardly believe I'd said such a thing. But I had said it.

Dad cleared his throat and Mother blinked her eyes very fast.

"Why, yes, of course, Cherry," Doris said. "You are, aren't you?"

"I don't know whether I am or not. I don't feel in love. I don't feel in love at all. I just feel so mad at him I could . . . but I didn't want him to get hurt."

Then I cried. Doris passed me her handkerchief and Mother poured out some cold chocolate.

"Now listen," I said, "you've got to be careful about this. I'm not going to be humiliated before—anybody. Steve doesn't feel this way."

"What way?" Mother asked, too softly.

"The way I do. And I wouldn't feel this way either if he hadn't been such a fool and got himself shot to pieces. Our bargain . . . what we said was . . . his mother did it . . . he took me on in place of having a kid sister. That's all. That's absolutely all. It's the old girls he has dates with. He just comes back to me."

"Yes, he comes back to you. Why does he come back to you, Cherry?"

"Because he gets fed up with them. . . . It's like when we were children and had been cooped-up all winter and when spring came we ran outdoors and yelled and screamed just to let off steam. So he comes back—to let off steam. And if any of you says anything to make me feel . . . foolish . . . I'll never forgive you. I'm glad I didn't get religious, like Doris, because I can bear all the malice I want to. And don't expect me to go turning the other cheek! Anybody that slaps me is going to get slapped right straight back. . . . And I wouldn't feel at all this way if he hadn't been such a liar and got himself all shot to pieces. . . . And he *was* nice about looking for Larry."

"Yes, of course," Mother said. She said it soothingly. She looked at Dad and Doris.

It was the same old look that Dad had given us, telling us not to upset Mother.

She gave it to them, telling them not to upset me. I saw it and I knew just what she meant. But I didn't say a word. I could see that Mother was a little upset herself.

## XII

MRS. DELAFIELD got to our house before nine o'clock. She was in such a nervous condition I couldn't bear to look at her. Her hands were shaking and she couldn't sit still a minute. She upset an ash tray. She spilled coffee. And she kept saying over and over that we must all be very calm so Steve would not suspect we had been worried about him. I was very calm myself.

I was glad when Mother said, "I've decided to go to the station with you, Gorge and Cherry. I wouldn't trust you two scatterbrains out alone. You'd probably come back with the wrong hero."

I was glad she was going. It made it seem—well, less officious. It made it seem more like a simple, family matter. Mrs. Delafield was glad too.

"And what's more," Mother went on, "I'm going to do the driving. You would think nothing at all, Gorge, of trying to shinny us up the first tree you came to. I'm wearing my best hat and I don't want to run any unnecessary risks."

We all got into the front seat together. It was early. Mother drove slowly around town. She said she loved using up somebody else's gas for a change. She stopped at the cigar store and got the New York papers. Steve's picture was on the front page again. She stopped at the bakery shop and got some rich pastry. She said our nervous reactions had taken two pounds off her and her neckline needed it back. Then she stopped at the florist's.

"It's a tremendous day in our rut-bound lives," she said. "We may as well deck ourselves out like a Polish wedding and be done with it. What do you want, Gorge? An orchid will really do things for that silver fox."

"A rosebud. One yellow rosebud."

"Good. I'll take a white carnation to show that one of the nation's mothers still has her maternal wits about her." She looked at me.

"Cornflowers, if you can get them. If not, just a sprig of little wild flowers, the kind you would pick in the woods."

She couldn't get cornflowers but she got me a couple of lilies of the valley and three or four forget-me-nots. We all pinned our flowers on our coats and smiled at one another.

"You are a real lifesaver, Helen," Mrs. Delafield said. "I am so keyed up it wouldn't surprise me a bit to see myself floating right through the top of the car."

"I'm glad it's your car," Mother said. "Dad would be wild if you took any such liberty with ours."

When we got to the station we sat in the car and waited until train time. Then we went over on the platform. We didn't say anything.

It's a very odd feeling, standing at the station, waiting for casualties to come by train. You get the feeling that the train is full of casualties, that all the passengers will be blind, or maimed, or disfigured, and you must just wait and pick yours out. It brings the war straight home to you.

It wasn't like that. The train came in. The porter swung down with a couple of bags and set up his stool. Three or four men in civilian clothes came next. They stood beside the steps, looking up, holding their hands up as if proffering help. Then Steve was on the steps. He had crutches under his arm. He looked over and waved at us and the men looked at us quickly and then back at him.

"Take it easy, Colonel," one of them said.

He passed the crutches down to one of them and came down the steps carefully, holding the railing with both hands. The man offered him the crutches but he shook his head. He came toward us, limping a little. He had a blue cornflower in his lapel. You can get anything in New York!

The men in civilian clothes came right along with him, one carrying his bag.

"Thank God there was nobody ranking me on the train or I'd be up for court-martial for this cornflower," he said cheerfully. "Hello, Mother." He kissed her. "This is my mother, boys." Then he kissed

Mother. "This, breaking the news to her gently, is my future mother-in-law." He looked at me but he did not kiss me. "This is my best girl. In fact, this is the only girl I've got."

The men took off their hats and smiled and said, "How do you do?"

"These," Steve went on with his introductions, "these are gentlemen of the press. Reporters to you. So if you had anything in mind to mention, don't, or you'll find yourselves in headlines. They have been hounding the life out of me trying to find out how the hell I had the nerve to come home without finishing off the war."

"We didn't go quite that far, Colonel," one of them said. "In fact, we think you just about did your share."

"I'm going home now with my three graces," Steve said. "I'm going to bed and I'm going to stay there until train time Monday morning. I have to check in at eight. If there's anything else you want to know, you can find me there."

We went over to the car. Mrs. Delafield got in the front seat with Mother. Steve got in the back with me. The men put his bag in the car and handed him his crutches. They stood there, with their hats off, looking after us as Mother drove carefully away.

"Does it hurt you to get bumped, Steve?" Mother asked chattily. "This is your car and it starts and stops with a good deal of a bang."

"Nothing hurts me," he said.

He sat very straight in the seat beside me, his arms folded, the crutches beside him.

Finally I couldn't stand it any longer. I touched his knee lightly with one finger.

"Are they artificial?" I whispered.

"No. There's nothing artificial about me."

"Are they your own?"

"My own what?"

"Legs."

"Yes, darling, of course. I've got some swell buddies in my outfit but I've never yet seen a guy that would swap you his legs—not if they were able to locomote."

"You said they were going to cut them off!"

"Darling, I told you they didn't have to! It was the sulfa drugs

that pulled the trick. . . . Mother, didn't you know they hadn't cut my legs off?"

"No. I thought they had. But I didn't care, Steve."

"And you thought . . . Mrs. Gillespie, stop the car, will you? Just park beside the road. There is a little thing back here that has to be kissed—kissed quickly and kissed hard."

"You'll have to wait till the next block," Mother said. "We're passing the Methodist parsonage."

She parked in the next block. "Now be good mothers and keep your heads in the direction we're traveling," he said.

He picked me up off the seat and took me on his lap. Then he kissed me. If anybody had ever told me I would be getting kissed in the back seat with Mother at the wheel! But everything was strange and unnatural that day.

"Calling time on you!" Mother said suddenly. "Here comes somebody."

I slid back down onto the seat and we drove on.

"I'm a little lame," Steve said. "The chances are I'll always be a little lame. Not bad. I can get around without the crutches but I use them most of the time, just saving myself. I get more sympathy that way, too."

I didn't say anything. Maybe I cried a little.

"Okay, darling, it's your turn," he whispered to me.

When we got to their house he had a little trouble getting out of the car. I handed him the crutches but he didn't use them until he got to the steps.

"Mountain climbing is one of the outs," he said. He was thin and pale and walking hurt him. There were drops of perspiration on his forehead when we got inside, though it was a cold day. Mrs. Delafield had the couch made up for him and a fire laid in the fireplace.

"Real service I call this," he said and made for the couch.

Mother was a great help. "Sit down, girls, just sit down and look at him. Gorge, you raided our tin-can larder one day. Will you turn me loose on yours?"

They went out to the kitchen together and I shoved the leather pouf over beside the couch and sat down. "Have you got flak in your hand or may I hold it?" I asked.

"You may hold it. In fact, it's a must. How old are you now, Cherry?"

"Going on eighteen."

"Go faster, darling, go faster."

He closed his eyes and I pressed his hand against my face.

"We must both be nuts, Cherry! One or both of us is always asleep or crying."

"Okay, Steve, it's your turn," I said.

I don't think he slept because he kept moving his hand against my face but he did not open his eyes again until Mother and Mrs. Delafield came in with the trays on which they had set up luncheon. While we were eating, Steve told Mother everything he had heard about Larry and the French underground and explained how spies relayed messages from one country to the other. He said it was pure luck that they happened to hit on somebody who had been in his camp; they had already asked at least fifty and had about a hundred fishing lines out in different directions. He explained what a slow and tedious business escaping is and how careful one has to be. And there's always danger. He said sometimes they had to hide out for weeks, like Larry and his friends in the Catholic church; but sometimes they were hiding out in lice and rat-infested holes instead of churches.

He had received one short letter from Larry. It had taken weeks to reach him and as he was coming anyhow he brought it along instead of mailing it.

Larry's familiar old sprawly writing! Mother kissed it.

"Dear Fool in England:

"I suppose it's part of the wacky setup that I should be writing to someone I never heard of! If it were a girl I could understand it! And it wouldn't seem quite so wacky! They tell me you'd like to get the real low-down, how things really are.

"You must know someone in the family. Dad, maybe, or Doris. Or maybe one of Mother's multitudinous clubs has hissed you onto me. I have another sister, too. She's just a kid. In fact, she's my favorite smack-down kid. But if they offered me all their pin-up gals on a shoestring, I wouldn't swap.

"It's not too tough. I can't say we like it, but it's not tough. The food is all right, as good as their own soldiers get, I think. No decent reading material—nothing but propaganda. Thanks for the *Esquires*. We can walk and swim and play ball, always with a few bloated Gestapos at our heels. They aren't rough with us and the camp is sanitary. I can't say that we have developed any love for them; no love lost either way, I take it. They treat us better than anyone else, I think; us and the British. God help prisoners from the occupied countries! And God help their late lamented allies—but they needed God's help when they were immediate allies instead of late.

"You must have a drag with someone. I inferred that when the animal keepers began asking who I knew in England, and what was his name. Also, had I any complaints, and was I comfortable, and if I had any kick coming what was I going to kick about? They even had a medico look me over to see if I had developed housemaid's knee or athlete's foot. Nope. No developments.

"Tell them—the folks I mean—that I'm okay. Not a scratch on me. Nothing but an innard itch to get back to business. We've got plans afoot, my friend, big plans. Tell them not to worry. War takes time.

"So long and thanks, Kind Fool in England."

"The big plans," Steve said, "were for the escape, of course. They must have pulled a slick job. The Frenchman told me we had a German spy there who worked hand in glove with them. He must have got some of this dope from him."

He took another piece of paper, neatly folded, from his pocket and looked at it. "I have another letter you might be interested in." He shook his head. "No, better not, I guess. They are my secret, most cherished orders."

I was sitting in front of him on the pouf and I saw what it was—that letter I had written him. "Come home, darling, just come home."

I didn't say a word.

He wasn't home for good; not even after all that. "Sure, I'm going back," he said. "I'm almost as good as new. One leg a little short for true herculean beauty perhaps, but I can still give 'em the works. But I'm in no hurry about it. I'll have to have a course of treatments somewhere and then I rate a nice, long, lazy leave."

"I suppose you've noticed that Cherry is cross at you," Mother said. "She's disgusted with you. She says it was nothing but conceit that made you ram that plane."

He laughed and offered me a bit of crab salad from his fork. "It's malnutrition," he said. "All war children have it. The trouble with the Army is, you don't say, 'May I?' or 'Must I?' or 'I don't want to.' You just say, 'Yes, sir.'"

"How high do you have to get before you begin having the 'yes, sir's' said to you?" I demanded.

"Higher than I'll ever get, Honey, higher than I'll ever get."

Because Steve was so tired and not able to go out doing things, Mrs. Delafield persuaded Mother to let me stay with them for the three days. Mother was hesitant at first.

"We couldn't get ourselves . . . mislaid anywhere," I said coaxingly. "He can't walk far enough."

"Sometimes farness is less dangerous than proximity. But you can stay, Cherry. . . . May we come in for a while tonight, Gorge? I want Dad and Doris to hear about Larry and the French underground. I'll bring a bag for you, Cherry."

He stayed on the couch all afternoon, said he wasn't going to tackle the stairs until he had to. The telephone rang almost constantly, friends, reporters, photographers, but Mrs. Delafield said firmly that he wasn't able to see anybody during this short leave and that everything would have to wait until he got his next one. It made me feel important to be there alone with them.

Mother and Dad and Doris came that evening, bringing my suitcase. Steve got up when they came in, but Dad made him lie right down again and we all sat around him. Doris went over to him suddenly, put one arm around his head and kissed him on the hair. "All right, Stevie," she said; "since you didn't hurt anybody but yourself, we'll declare an armistice."

The parents looked surprised but we three laughed heartily.

"That's fine, General!" he said. "I'll make it unconditional surrender if you prefer."

"But just see that you don't forget the rules," she said warningly.

"I've already signed on the dotted line. What do you want me to do? Eat them?" he demanded.

Mother and Gorge looked at each other as if they couldn't believe their own ears and Dad looked polite but blank, very blank. I felt happy that we three, Steve and Dorry and I, had a sweet little secret between us.

Dad was magnanimous about everything. He said the car was full of gas, the tires were rolling and I was a great little driver; he said we could use it as much as we liked.

"My only car and my best little driver are yours for the next three days," he told Steve.

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate the priority but there may have to be some readjustment of details. The time element is not entirely satisfactory," Steve said.

It was nice but because of his weariness they did not stay long. When they were getting ready to go Steve sat up on the couch but Dad wouldn't let him stand. He said if Steve wasn't entitled to a little sitting-down he didn't know who was!

"Doris," Steve said, "come here a minute. Let me have a look at those fingernails!"

Doris, laughing, held out both hands. She had lovely hands. Steve examined them, frowning. Then he began at the left little finger and began kissing them. By the time he reached the third finger, Doris and I were convulsed with laughter. The three parents looked shocked. They glanced from one to the other of us and then glanced away again quickly. Steve went on, finger by finger, slowly kissing.

"Come along, Dorry!" Mother said, sounding a little out of breath. "Steve's all worn out."

"My favorite tonic," he said. "That could never wear me out!"

Mrs. Delafield and I went to the door with them and Steve limped across and leaned against one of the white columns. We all said good night.

Dorry put her arms around me. "Cherry, I think you're the sweetest, nicest, most darling thing that ever lived. I love you more than anything in the world." She followed Dad and Mother out and closed the door.

"She forgot about Larry and Slim," I said apologetically.

"She didn't forget anything," Steve said. "God, what a girl!"

He got upstairs all right and into his room which Mrs. Delafield

had ready for him. It was beautiful, with flowers and books and cigarettes. His pajamas and dressing gown were on the foot of the bed, and his slippers beside it.

"I'll take Cherry down to her room and then come back and help you," Mrs. Delafield said. "Just wait for me, Steve. Don't do any more moving around or stooping than you have to."

She took me down to the guest room where she had flowers for me, too. "Cherry," she said, "we're both so happy you're going to stay with us these three days."

"I am, too," I said. "I didn't think Mother would allow it."

"Cherry," she said, in some slight embarrassment, "you couldn't be jealous of . . . Doris, could you?"

"Of course, I'm jealous of Doris. I've always been jealous of her—because she's so beautiful and so popular, and I'm almost beginning to be jealous of her religion, now!"

"I mean about Steve. He does such silly things. It doesn't mean anything. And you want him to like your sister, don't you?"

"I want him to love her. I want her to love him, too."

"Well, yes. . . . I'll run down and see if I can help Steve. Anything you need or want, Cherry, just ask for it. If I've got it, you shall have it."

I opened the suitcase and right on top was a lovely black and flame-colored dressing gown of Dorry's. It was the nicest thing she had. She had paid twenty-nine dollars for it and it was just ravishing. I knew she had lent it to me as a special treat and I felt happier than ever. I got ready for bed but I didn't hurry. I walked around the room in Dorry's gown and looked at everything, including myself in the mirror pretty often.

Mrs. Delafield rapped lightly on my door. "Cherry?" I opened the door. "Oh, Cherry, how lovely you look!"

"Yes," I said. "Don't tell anybody but it's really Dorry's. She lent it to me for a surprise. It cost twenty-nine dollars out of her war-work money before she got religion and began saving it."

Mrs. Delafield laughed. "That's wonderful! Tell Steve. He'll get a kick out of it. I'm very happy. He likes me much better than he used to."

"I love you. I've loved you from the very beginning. But I'm glad you and Mother are letting yourselves go gray again."

"Why?"

"I don't know exactly. But I had a kind of a feeling that if mothers hated so terribly to begin to be—a little old—I hated it too. I was perfectly willing to be eighteen, but that was the absolute limit. Just eighteen. No more and no less."

"You funny little thing! Tell Steve about that, too. I really came, Cherry, to ask if you would mind sitting with him awhile? He told me to ask you. He's a little keyed up and restless. Would you mind?"

I glanced down at the satin gown. "No, I shan't mind," I said complacently. "I'm not a bit sleepy."

She went down with me. There was one small light in the room. A big chair was drawn up for me beside his bed.

"The most beautiful thing in the world," Steve said.

"Yes, but it isn't mine; it's Dorry's."

"Most beautiful thing in the world," he repeated. But he wasn't looking at the gown.

He looked tired and sick.

Mrs. Delafield kissed us both. "As soon as you think you can sleep, Steve," she said, "send the little chatterbox back to her room. Good night, Cherry, and thank you." She went out, smiling back at us over her shoulder.

"Sorry, Sweet, but the old man's all in. The second thousand years are the hardest."

"It's your own fault," I said, reaching for his hand. "You shouldn't be so darned polite. You don't have to snap to attention every time anybody draws a full breath."

He laughed. "Come up on the bed with me," he said. "There's plenty of room."

I got up on the bed and lay down beside him, outside the covers. I was careful to smooth out the dressing gown. He put his arm around me and moved my head so that our faces were touching. He said, "Do you love me, Cherry?"

I nodded my head against his. He laughed again.

"You didn't answer, Cherry. The question is, do you love me?"

"Yes."

"Yes what?"

"Yes, Steve."

He laughed quite heartily then. "Yes what Steve?"

I held him very close to me. "Yes, Steve, I love you. I love you—terribly."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. And if you can't take my word for it, you can ask Dorry; she knew it all the time."

"I'll take your word for it. . . . Cherry, why don't you ever look at me? Above the chin, I mean."

"I do look at you. But when I look at you, Steve, you're always looking at me and I get a frightened feeling. I feel as if I'm lost."

"Do you, darling? I feel that way, too; exactly that way. But it doesn't frighten me. I like it. I felt that way on the grass after Dorry's party. It was a wonderful feeling. I felt as if we were lost together—and it was wonderful. Look at me now. Let's be lost again."

We looked at each other. I didn't feel frightened that time.

"Steve," I said, "I'm not a bit proud of you. You had no earthly business ramming that plane. You've got to learn to say no."

"I'll never learn it in the Air Force."

"You'll learn it from me then. When I say no, I mean it."

"Are you saying 'no Maida'?"

"Absolutely, no Maida!"

"How do you know I love you?"

"You don't! If you did, you'd have taken better care of yourself. You'd have said the heck with their silly old plane!"

"You're wonderful, Cherry, you're wonderful. The heck with their silly old war! . . . Keep looking at me."

He spoke just once more. He said, "Stay lost with me, Cherry. Go to sleep and stay lost with me in your dreams all night."

When I wakened there was a soft, heavy blanket tucked over me. I opened my eyes. He was looking at me. "Did you ever think of getting married?" he said.

"Yes, of course. Everybody thinks about getting married unless they want to be old maids!"

"Did you ever think about marrying me?" he asked.

"No, I never thought exactly of marrying you," I said. "Not exactly. But I thought of never letting you go away from me any more if I can help it!"

"Think about marrying me. You have to get used to the idea sometime. I hope you don't think for a minute you're ever going to get me away from me, Cherry. You're not. You're here for keeps. You're going to stay curled up in that nice warm corner in my heart . . . and stay there . . . and stay there . . ."

"That's nice, Steve. . . . But please try to be more careful after this. . . . I must go now."

"Why?"

"Well, no special reason. . . . Move over a little. I'm right on the edge of the bed."

He moved over but he moved me along with him. "Who would ever have dreamed I could be so maudlin over a little thing hardly out of her diapers!"

I frowned as if I were offended and closed my eyes.

"The rule is that every time you quit looking at me you must say, 'I love you.' You needn't shout, a whisper will do."

"It's easier to look at you," I said.

"Or you can try just kissing me, if you prefer. I'm easily satisfied."

He held his face against me and closed his eyes. His face looked hard and stern. The lines were deep, cut deep. His lips, though he touched me gently, were firm.

When he went off to sleep again I slipped out quietly and went downstairs where I found Mrs. Delafield quietly preparing breakfast.

"Did you come in and cover me up?" I asked.

"Yes, I did. I stopped in to see if Steve was all right. And he certainly was. So I got a blanket for you. I knew if I let you catch cold your mother wouldn't let me borrow you again. Don't you want to run up and get a little real rest? He'll probably sleep quite late, he's so tired. And I want you to feel fresh and rested."

But I wasn't sleepy. So we had breakfast and talked. We talked

of the things we had kept hidden before, things he had written in his letters, and how worried we had been. Mothers are very noble. She had been mostly sorry for Steve and for me; she said for herself she didn't really think she cared if he came home a cripple. She just wanted him at home. I wanted him home, too, but I cared; there wasn't anything noble about me. I wanted him to be all right.

We decided not to have any kind of parties or excitement and not let any callers in to see him, except my family.

"If he wants to talk, we'll talk," she said. "If he wants to drive, there's the car. If he wants to be sulky, let him sulk. It's his three days and he can do what he likes with them."

I agreed to every word. It was what I wanted, too.

He came downstairs, walking carefully. He said the recreational facilities in this institution were foul; he might as well be stuck off in some desert island.

"If you were on a desert island, you wouldn't have anybody to come downstairs to," I reminded him.

"That's so, too. Yes, something to come downstairs to is really something!"

Dad stopped by on his way to the office, making himself late to do it. He wanted to know if there were any errands he could do for us in town and to remind us that the car and coupons were ours for the asking. "How do you feel, Cherry?" he asked me. "All right?"

"Wonderful! I feel wonderful!"

"That's plagiarism, pure and simple," Steve said. "I said it first and I want the credit."

When other people began telephoning and coming to the door bringing gifts—flowers and candy and books—Mrs. Delafield told us to go upstairs to Steve's sitting room and keep clear of the racket. She promised not to let anybody in and we were glad to go. We stayed there laughing to hear Mrs. Delafield getting rid of people, politely, without faltering.

When Mother came, she brought her upstairs. Mother was carrying a basket. "I know you three scatterbrains would never think of solid food, but don't forget that a certain small child has got to have her calories. So I brought you a chicken casserole and some creamed

potatoes and salad. It's still hot. Will you sit down and eat or shall I walk off with aforesaid infant?"

"We'll sit right down and eat," Steve said.

Mrs. Delafield set up the card table. We ate in our dressing gowns. Mother looked quite stunning in her blue suit. She told us little things that had happened around the house and about people who called up. Nothing had really happened but she made a gay recital of it.

Finally Steve said, "By the way, did you hear this one—stop me if you've heard this before! The squirt here says we're in love."

"Fancy that," Mother said faintly. She did not look up from her plate. Finally she added, "The squirt under discussion is an infant in arms. . . ."

"My arms!" Steve said. "We must be explicit about these things. No arms but mine!"

"Well, arms anyhow," Mother said, not looking at any of us. "Arms are arms, aren't they?"

"Not in this case! Not if they're anybody's arms but mine."

"Well, your arms then! Let's change the subject. Let's talk about something else. . . . Gorge, don't you think this new generation has gone haywire?"

"Yes, I do. Definitely and distinctly haywire—all except Cherry. I can get along with her all right. My vocabulary isn't equal to the rest of the generation."

"I didn't mean to bring down the wrath of the gods—and mothers—on a whole generation," Steve said. "I just wanted to get it into the record, once and for all, that I adore said infant."

"I think you have made it sufficiently clear," Mother said. "We do not require a blueprint."

It was ridiculous but in a nice way, very nice. I felt like smiling all the time, even when no one was saying anything.

When we had finished luncheon, Mother said, "Cherry, how about enveloping yourself in a garment or two and going downtown with me? Dad was in a divine mood this morning. When I told him you are in need of a few things he wrote me a check for a hundred dollars and did not remind me there ought to be a little change."

"Oh, no, you don't, Mrs. Gillespie!" Steve said. "It's too soon to begin pulling mother-in-law tricks out of your bag! You're aiming to spirit her away."

"I'm aiming to buy her a dress. She needs a dress and I've got the money!"

"Why does she need a dress? She's not going any place. You hang onto the hundred bucks and we'll all do some rug-cutting down at Pinky's later on. A dress is the last thing she needs right now."

"He's going to be hard to get along with," Mother said plaintively. "I think he has a Mother Hubbard complex."

Ridiculous, all ridiculous. But so pleasant. I felt as grown-up as Doris. Not as religious, maybe, but my feeling was so happy and so satisfied it was almost like religion.

Mrs. Delafield moved a soft chaise longue out of her room in beside Steve's bed and I sat there all afternoon. Right beside him. Sometimes he slept. I slept a little, too. I always wakened smiling and then Steve smiled. But he only smiled when I was looking at him. When I peeked through my lashes, without moving, he looked tired and hard and the lines in his face were deep.

They—my folks—were coming over again that night and we decided to be very partified about it. Steve wore his best uniform, with all his ribbons and pins and badges. Some of them I had never seen before. Mrs. Delafield and I dressed up, too. While we were sitting decorously in the living room, waiting for them, Mrs. Delafield said, "Steve, your technique is certainly rusty. Don't you know you can't hang onto a girl these days unless you give her an engagement ring?"

"Don't tell me we're engaged!" he said.

"Don't tell me you're not!" Mrs. Delafield said. They were both laughing.

"There goes my freedom," Steve said.

"I'm engaged," I said. "I'm awfully engaged. I haven't any freedom at all!"

"Come over here, Cherry," Mrs. Delafield said. I went over and she took a ring, a beautiful diamond ring, off her finger. "Take this over to Steve and tell my idiot of a son to put it where it rightfully belongs."

I couldn't do that. I put my hands behind me. "It's yours," I said. "It's yours!" she said, right after me.

Steve came over to us then. He was still laughing. He kissed his mother. She handed him the ring.

"If you know left from right, give me the proper hand," he said. I gave it to him.

"With this ring, Cherry, Mother and I thee wed." The ring was too big for me, although her hands were small and slim. "Will it be binding if she wears it on her thumb?" he asked.

"Certainly not. Thumbs are illegitimate," she said. "I'll get some yarn and we'll pad it until we can get it cut down to baby-size."

Steve kissed her again. He didn't kiss me until she had gone to get the yarn. When she came back they both worked together over it, holding my hand, padding it until it would stay on my finger.

It was a delirious time. Everything about it was delirious. But nice delirium.

When the folks came I kept my hand turned palm up on my lap. They—my folks—were all in a very good frame of mind and talked pleasantly. But Steve and his mother kept looking at each other and laughing. I didn't see anything to laugh at and I couldn't think of anything to say, so I sat there smiling and kept my hand upside down on my lap.

Mother and Dad and Doris began looking a little surprised and puzzled. "There's some clever joke going on," Mother said. "But I give you my word I didn't hear anything to laugh at."

"It's something you don't hear," Mrs. Delafield said. "It's something you look at. It's Cherry."

They all looked at me. I blushed.

Mother and Dad and Doris kept on looking at me. They were not laughing.

I turned my hand over. "They gave me this ring!"

They came over and looked at it.

"Who gave it to you?" Mother asked in a small voice.

"Mrs. Delafield."

"I gave it to her," Steve put in immediately. "I gave it to her . . . vicariously. Mother put me up to it."

"We're engaged to her," Mrs. Delafield said. "We wanted to make sure it was binding. I'll have it cut down next week."

"It's beautiful, Cherry," Doris said.

Dad cleared his throat.

"It's very beautiful," Mother said.

"I'm so glad to get rid of it," Mrs. Delafield said. "A big bright diamond like that isn't becoming to my nearly gray hair."

They all laughed then and went back to their chairs. I didn't keep my hand palm up any more but I held my right hand over it. It felt warm though diamonds, I think, are usually cold.

We talked about a good many things. They did most of the talking. I was still a little delirious.

Doris said, "Not meaning to throw a monkey wrench into the pleasant evening, but I want to tell you that . . . Slim's gone."

We all sat very still.

"Gone, Dorry?" I said.

"Yes. Gone to war. Don't tell me you hadn't heard there's a war on!" Doris laughed.

I didn't laugh. "Do you mean—he's clear gone? Isn't he coming home first?"

"Yes, clear gone, Cherry. And he isn't coming home first. Evidently they wanted him in a hurry. They certainly need somebody in a hurry!"

We didn't say anything so she went on: "I'm pretty sure it's the Pacific area, Steve. It's a San Francisco APO number. He'll try to let me know in some subtle way though he isn't usually very subtle. I hadn't heard from him for ten days and then I heard—this."

"When did you hear it, Dorry?" Steve asked. His face looked hard and the lines more deeply cut.

"Day before yesterday," she said. "The day you got home, Steve."

"You didn't tell me," I said. "You let me sit around here, being happy like a fool and—"

I got up and went out of the room. I was going upstairs. But when I got into the hall, Doris and Steve were there, too, one on each side.

"What we three need," Steve said, "is a good heart-to-heart talk. We've got to get better acquainted. And we've got to give you a good lacing-down, Dorry."

"I can take it," she said.

We started up the stairs. They were wide stairs but it was a little crowded because we all walked together, very close.

"Come up to my room and let's thresh this thing out," Steve said.

My knees were trembling.

"Let's sit here on the stairs awhile first," Doris said, "where it's nice and dark."

We sat down about halfway upstairs. They put their arms around me, one on either side, but because we were so close together their arms were around each other too.

"Doris," I said, "can you ever forgive me? I'll never forgive myself, but can you ever please forgive me?"

"For what, Cherry?"

"For being so happy! So selfish and happy. I never thought of anyone else. I forgot all about Mother and how sad and brave she's been about Larry. I never thought of you and Slim. I didn't think of all those soldiers—that so many people love—being killed every minute. I didn't even think of Larry."

"Why, there's nothing to forgive, Cherry!" she said gently. "There's nothing to forgive about being happy! Take every minute of it you can get, darling. Grab every second of it and hug it and love it and—be as happy as you can! *As long as you can!*"

"I'm with Cherry on this, Dorry," Steve said. "I think you should have told us. We didn't need to think of ourselves every minute. We could have thought of you—a little."

"I didn't want to tell you. I didn't want you to think of me—only of each other. And don't think I'm not happy, too—because I am happy. I'm very happy."

"You can't be," I said. "You can't possibly be."

She laughed again. Her laughter hurt more than if she had cried. "I most possibly can be, because I am. Oh, I don't mean I'm not sorry he's gone. Of course, I'm sorry. And of course, I hope he isn't going to get . . . hurt. But he had to go. And think how lucky we were, Cherry, that he was near home so long and we could be so close together and get so cemented together. It's not just falling in love that's important. You have to get your love cemented. And we had time for that. We were very lucky."

I didn't see anything lucky about it. I thought it was terrible. "Did Dad and Mother know about it?" I asked.

"Yes, of course. I told them not to tell you—first, because you were so worried about Steve, and then because you were so happy. But I had to tell you tonight because it's in the papers. I feel much better now that you know. I hate not telling you things, Cherry, but there are some things you can't come right out and tell. I thought you never would get onto how it was with Slim and me!"

"Steve tipped me off," I admitted meekly.

"Somebody had to! Dad's been perfectly marvelous, Cherry. He suggested that you chuck school and I chuck Du Pont and we both light out for California and maybe we could corner him somewhere—long enough to say good-by. He said we could take the car and he'd get us the gas if he had to hold up the pipe line!"

"I hate to say this," Steve said, "but Larry must be a thoroughly obnoxious individual."

"Larry! Obnoxious!" Doris and I said together.

"He's got to be. It's the law of averages. The rest of the family is so darned nice there's got to be a mess of obnoxiousness—that word nearly choked me!—all wrapped up in Larry, poor devil. I can't imagine why I went to the trouble of looking him up. Black sheep should stay lost."

We laughed.

"Steve," Doris said, "if you were a four-star general and had Slim right under your thumb, in common honesty I would have to say this: There's more obnoxiousness in the air you breathe and the awful remarks you make than ever got within twenty miles of Larry. He is the epitome of unobnoxiousness. Swallow that if you can."

"I can swallow it but I'll never be able to digest it. Come on upstairs. I'm getting sitter's cramp."

We went up to his rooms.

"How lovely!" Doris said. "Isn't this nice? It looks like a bridal suite."

"Minus only a bride," Steve said. "And I'm doing my best."

"The chaise doesn't belong here," I explained, because it didn't fit the other furnishing. "Mrs. Delafield brought it in so I could sit here and go to sleep if I wanted to."

"And she wanted to. . . . Doris, did you ever think of giving me a present? You wouldn't really object to giving me a present, would you?"

"Not if it was very cheap," Doris said.

Steve and I sat on the edge of the bed and she sat on the chaise.

"I wouldn't exactly call it cheap. If it was cheap I couldn't want it so much."

"I've already given you a lot of presents," Doris said. "I suppose you've forgotten all those trashy little things we sent you when you were in the hospital in England."

"No, I haven't forgotten. They were swell. But do you realize that in all these long and tedious years, nobody . . . not one of you! . . . I don't blame Cherry, for she's too young to understand. And I don't blame the mothers, because they're too old to remember. So I have to blame you, Doris. . . ."

"I'm used to that," Doris said. "It has even been hinted that the war's my fault."

We laughed. Doris and I were curious and puzzled. I wished he had asked me for what he wanted.

"It isn't that I need anything to remember her by," he said. "I remember her too darned well for my own peace of mind. But just the same . . . there are some things . . . and I can't understand it, Doris! Slim must have told you. I'll bet you didn't forget to give him one. You just didn't waste any time thinking of me . . ."

"Steve, you idiot, get to the point. What in the world are you talking about?"

Doris was laughing heartily. I laughed a little but I was racking my brain, trying to think of something he could possibly want that he didn't already have. He had almost everything.

"Don't think I'm complaining, because I'm not. You were kind and sent me a lot of things and I've kept them all—except the edibles. And I'm not going to hold it against you, Doris; I'm going to be a good brother to you and spank you whenever you need it."

"Steve, I'm just about ready to turn loose with the fingernails!" Doris said.

"That reminds me. If you had told us about Slim before, I would

not have been satisfied with kissing your belligerent fingernails. I'd have kissed your little trilbies."

Doris didn't say anything for a while. Then she laughed, she made herself laugh. I couldn't do that. "Then I'm glad I didn't tell you," she said. "Mr. Du Pont had really given us a workout that day and my feet hurt. I was wearing my oldest and wornest and most comfortable shoes."

"I think I'll have to do it now."

He leaned over, wincing a little, for any sudden movement hurt him, and kissed the toe of her little blue pump.

"It's all right, Cherry," she said. "I didn't work today and my feet do not hurt. They're my best shoes and well worth kissing."

I didn't feel like laughing—but you couldn't help laughing.

"If you want the other one kissed, you'll have to bring it up to me," Steve said. "I've got a crick in the flak."

"One's plenty, thanks," Doris said.

"You didn't tell her about the present," I reminded him. I'd been thinking about it all the time—I couldn't think what he wanted.

"I hadn't forgotten it. Doris," he said briskly, "do you realize that in all these years I have never had so much as a snapshot of our little favorite here? I've never even seen one. I know that she exists—but shouldn't somebody have a picture of her? At least for identification if she commits murder or mayhem!"

Doris leaned over off the chaise and kissed him. "Steve!" she said. "You really *don't* know us very well, do you? I have dozens. I have hundreds. Come over to the house—I'll show you. You know it's a very odd thing, Steve: everybody except Larry and me says I'm better-looking than Cherry. But she takes a much better picture. Her pictures are lovely. I'll give you whatever you want! . . . No, I won't! I've got one picture of Cherry I wouldn't give you for anything in the world."

"What picture, Dorry?" I asked.

"You never saw it, Cherry. I was furious. I just loved it. I'll show it to you, Steve. That lousy worm at the drugstore, Cherry, took a snap of you and Skivar wrestling in the street for my step-ins and he enlarged it and sent it to me. He has a frightful crush on Cherry, Steve."

"If he isn't a corpse, he's going to be," Steve said. "I'll come tomorrow, Dorry. But sometime—if you can get it—I would like a little snapshot of her lying, dew-soaked and bored, under a big tree with Skivar working playfully away at her spinal column; and I want her to look lost, very lost."

"I'll try, Steve. But she couldn't be lost with Skivar there. He dotes on Cherry. He'd drag her home from the other end of the world. She couldn't be *very* lost!"

"Oh, yes, she could, Dorry. Yes, she could!"

We had gone upstairs to be sad about Slim. But we weren't sad. We weren't exactly happy. We laughed a good deal but it wasn't like happiness.

"Do you want to show Dorry your room, Cherry?" Steve said. "Cherry rates a room here now. She rates the whole house, if you ask me. She's our star boarder."

We both got up.

"I'll come along pretty soon," he said.

We went down the hall to my room. I was sorry I hadn't straightened it up a little. Dorry's dressing gown was over the foot of the bed and I had left my powder and lipstick on the bedside table where I could get at them in a hurry.

I put them away as fast as I could. As I was hanging up the dressing gown I said, "He said it was the most beautiful thing in the world, Dorry."

"Did he? You may have it, Cherry."

"I can have it! Don't you . . . It's so beautiful, Dorry!"

"I don't want it. Slim likes blue better."

Steve came to the door. "I had to come because I knew you would be talking behind my back. . . . Oh, I haven't been here before! This is nice, Cherry. So this is where you sleep?"

"I do not," I said. "I haven't been near it."

I could have bitten my tongue off. Doris didn't say anything. There was quite a long silence.

Steve said, "Shake not thy gory fingernails at me, Dorry. If she hasn't any better taste than to sleep sitting up in chairs or outside half a dozen blankets, freezing herself into pneumonia as like as not, you can't blame me."

"I wasn't at all cold," I said defensively. "Mrs. Delafield covered me up."

"Doris," Mother called from the downstairs hall, "we weren't invited for the week end!"

"Mother, don't you want to come up and see Cherry's room? It's really sweet."

They came upstairs. They looked at my room and then they went down the long hall and looked at Steve's. They were quiet about it. Polite but quiet. They didn't laugh much.

"Mother," Doris said, "Steve wants us to get a snapshot of Cherry. He wants her lying on the grass under a big tree with Skivar gnawing at her backbone."

"I know the tree," Mother said. "Cherry pointed it out to me."

Nobody said anything. Steve was the only one who laughed. They went home almost immediately.

When we went back upstairs Mrs. Delafield put a thick soft blanket over the foot of Steve's bed and brought in an extra pillow.

"If anybody catches cold or stays awake all night, you can't blame me," she said. "You'll come back and sit with him awhile, won't you, Cherry?"

"Yes."

When I went back he was all settled in bed. "Turn off the light and come up here with me, Sweet," he said.

So I did it.

He said, "Cherry, when Larry comes home you don't expect him to be as he was before, do you?"

"Why, of course, Steve! Larry couldn't change. He's always been that way."

"He isn't going to be 'that way' any more. Cherry, I'm telling you. He'll never be 'that way' any more. It's what war does to you. And it isn't only the war. You can take war. It's the coming back—it's getting back—and you've prayed and schemed and pulled wires and dreamed about it—and then you get here and you say, 'What the hell was I raising all the fuss about?' . . . Not this time, Honey—I was coming back to you—but the first time. You see, Cherry, you didn't know me before I went."

"Will Slim be different too?"

"You bet he'll be different. I didn't know him very well. He seemed like a—well, a very nice boy to me. Kind of athletic. Pleasant, very pleasant. And mad about Doris. A nice boy."

"Won't she love him any more?"

"Yes, she'll love him, darling. She'll probably love him more. She'll get a few heartbreaks out of it but . . . I hope she'll love him more."

"Steve, what's the matter? Don't you love America any more?"

"I don't know what's the matter. Nobody knows. . . . Yes, I love it . . . I suppose I love it. . . . But I love it for what it set out to be. I love it for what I thought it was! I love it a little for what I think maybe by some miracle it can be! But I don't love it for being a glamour-puss. I say the hell with it."

I didn't say anything. I tried to remember "I pledge allegiance to my flag," and I got it all mixed up with glamour-puss. I didn't know what he was talking about.

Steve kissed me. "I shouldn't talk like this to you, Cherry. But I have to talk to you like this. You've all got to take some talking you don't like. All this damned silly poppycock they chuck out to you . . ." He laughed, a wry, twisted kind of laugh. "It's all right over there. You take it. You get hell and you give as much of the same as you can. That's all right. You come back after a mission and count the planes that got back. A couple of the swellest guys you ever knew . . . didn't come back. You take it. Then you come home . . . I don't mean this time, Cherry. I got just what I came for—you and Mother. That's all I came for. I had my lesson the first time."

I didn't feel at all like kissing him. I didn't care about touching him. I was cold.

I pulled the blanket up over me. "You didn't finish," I said. "Then you come home——"

"And we go nuts. It isn't war. It's a motion picture. It's a super-duper million-dollar film spectacle. They want to sell bonds. So what do they do? They get a lot of pretty girls to go out in shorts. They get them to give a kiss with every bond. You think of those guys that didn't come back and you say the hell with them. For another kiss some big shot would have put up another thousand

dollars and there'd have been a better plane or another bomb and maybe he'd have come back. . . . It isn't war, not here! It's plenty of war where they are. Not here! It's another motion picture. Uncle Sam is a glamour-puss. Cherry, if I ever catch you selling a kiss to wheedle a war bond out of some fat lecher who has the money and could buy it anyhow—”

“I wouldn't do that,” I said hastily. “They wouldn't ask me. You have to be very beautiful for that.”

“Yes. That's it. You have to be beautiful. It's a beautiful war. But it isn't quite so beautiful for those who love somebody who isn't coming back. And it's not very beautiful for those who come back without some guys they think a lot of.”

I didn't say anything.

I thought on the whole we'd been nice about the war, doing without the car, using rations and having meatless Tuesdays. But we didn't seem quite so nice that night. There was Larry, emaciated and half-starved, trying to get back to his outfit. There was Slim, gone somewhere, never to be the same again. And there were millions of others; some wouldn't come back at all; many would be lame or blind or sick; none of them ever to be the same again. And mostly there was Steve, who had so nearly not come back the last time and would sometime be going again and might not . . .

I pulled the covers back. I got in beside him and put my arms around him, hard. “Steve, let me feel you,” I said. “I want to feel you while you're still here.”

“Cherry,” he said in a very hard voice, “how can they blame us . . . how can they blame . . . if we just take what we can out of it . . . when we can get it? How can they blame us?”

“They don't, Steve. Nobody blames you. We all want you to have everything you want.”

He held me very close for a while. Then he put his face down in the pillow. He was laughing. I think he was crying too. It was dark in the room and I couldn't be sure. But I didn't feel like teasing him about whose turn it was. I wanted to know whether he was laughing or crying but I couldn't very well ask.

“Steve,” I said, “do you remember that first time I saw you? Here,

in this house, downstairs? It was that first party for the old crowd. And when I first saw you, I thought, 'Why, he isn't very good-looking! He isn't as good-looking as Larry, by any means. He isn't even as good-looking as Slim.' But you must have changed a lot, Steve, because now whenever I look at you I think you're—a man shouldn't be beautiful, because that's feminine—but I think you're beautiful. Every time I look at you I think, 'I don't see how a man could be so beautiful.' Even here in the dark, when I can't see you, I still keep thinking you're beautiful."

"Even with the limp, Honey?" he said. His voice was muffled in the pillow.

"It makes you look distinguished," I said. "It makes you look set apart from everybody else."

"Isn't love kind, darling? It's the kindest thing in the world. It's the only kind thing in the world."

He turned his face over against mine. He had been crying. There were tears on his cheek. He had a very strange way of kissing. It was a nice way. He put his lips against me and kept them there a long time. Sometimes he talked a little, without taking his lips away. Sometimes he put a finger up to the corner of my mouth and moved my lips closer to his.

When he lifted his face I took it in my hands and brought it back.

"Don't," I said, "don't—"

"Don't what, darling?"

"Don't stop. Don't go away."

He stayed awhile, his lips moving a little on mine, one finger at the corner of my mouth.

Then he said, "Cherry, you get the hell out of here. You skoot into your own little room and say your prayers and go to bed. You're such a kid, Cherry!"

"I'm not a kid. You can't keep on being a kid forever. I wish I could, Steve. . . . No, I don't wish it! I don't wish it at all! You wouldn't love me—like this."

He kissed me again. "Private Cherry," he said briskly, "do you know how to say, 'No, sir'?"

I didn't say anything.

"If you've never said it before, say it now! Say it loud and firm! Say, 'No, Colonel Delafield. The answer is, No!' And then get up and go to bed!"

"I didn't say no," I said. "I didn't say anything."

"The answer is no," he said. "You've got to learn to take orders. Now that you've said no, get up and go to bed. You needn't bother to kiss me."

I got up and went to the door. Then I turned back. I kneeled down beside the bed and took his head in my arms. "It isn't any bother," I said. "It's no bother at all."

He didn't try to kiss me but I made him. I said, "Good night, my dear, precious darling. If you ever get yourself hurt again, I'll never forgive you."

He said, "Good night, Cherry. Sleep tight." His voice was muffled in the pillow again. "Slam the door after you, Cherry. Slam it hard."

### XIII

I DID NOT sleep for a long time. I had thought we were doing pretty well about the war. We were very fortunate not to be bombed or set on fire, but we bought bonds when they asked us to, we salvaged everything they asked for, and worked for OCD and the Red Cross.

But I did not feel so complacent about us that night. For the first time I realized that it must make them pretty mad, over there, waiting in fox holes for the next bomb; charging when they were told to charge, not knowing whether they had a Chinaman's chance; going up in their flying squadrons, not knowing whether they would have to tangle with ten or ten thousand; and knowing that back here, at home, we were wheedling ammunition for them with kisses. I felt ashamed. I had thought it was all exciting and spectacular before but that night I was ashamed.

When I went downstairs next morning I could hear Steve and his mother in the dining room, laughing and talking together cheerfully. I did not feel cheerful.

"Come on in, Cherry," Mrs. Delafield said. "We were just saying how lovely it is to be acquainted after so many years."

"What we cannot understand," Steve added, "is why some fresh little upstart had to have a finger in the introduction." He held his hand out to me. When I put mine in it, he kissed it.

"Isn't it nice that I like you, Cherry?" Mrs. Delafield said. "If you were somebody I do not like and had to watch Steve making such a fool of himself—over, for instance, some Maida or other—I'd have turned him over to the MP's before this."

"Only yourself to blame," Steve told her. "You engaged me to her. And nice going, Mother, nice going."

"Come and sit down, Cherry," Mrs. Delafield said. "Steve, give her back her hand. She'll catch—"

"Infantile paralysis, as befitting her age?" he suggested.

"No, kisser's cramp in the fingers."

There was a place set for me at the table. Steve sat at the head, Mrs. Delafield at the foot and I alone in the very wide in-between. Orange juice in a bowl of ice was waiting for me; the toaster was at work.

"Steve thinks," Mrs. Delafield said, "that after he sticks around where he is for an indefinite period he may be sent down to Atlantic City for hospitalization."

"Atlantic City!" I said. "I know all about Atlantic City. There's where you go to get gay, not to get back on your feet."

"Not since the Army moved in," Steve said. "The night life went out when the fight life moved in."

"That 'ain't the way I heared it,'" I said. "You can't tell me they have all those MP's down there rounding up delinquents just because they overlooked their vitamins this morning."

"I'll only have to stay there until I'm boarded," Steve explained quickly.

"Boarded?" I said. "Has the Army taken over the old father-and-woodshed racket?"

"Yes, and how! But that isn't the kind of 'boarded' I mean. It means I've got to go up before an examining board. They have to pass on my pores and eyelashes and determine whether I can ever stop another bullet. If they decide I'm too punctured to stop a fly,

they'll ease me out. If they think they can camouflage me back into a semblance of human form, they'll give me a brief leave and send me across again. It's going to be hard getting out from under. I have lived to regret my popularity."

"Do you want to get out from under?" I asked bluntly.

Steve avoided my eyes. He avoided his mother's eyes too. He didn't look at anything. "I can't exactly say that I do," he said reluctantly. "They gave me a preference and I said—" He hesitated a long while. Mrs. Delafield sat and stared at him. I did, too. "I said I'd go back," he admitted.

We sat there for a while.

"Do you know, speaking offhand like this," Steve said cheerfully, "do you know the nicest sound in the world? The most heart-lifting sound? What would you say it is, Cherry?"

"I wouldn't say it's exactly a sound," I said. "It's more—a kind of a feeling."

They looked surprised. Then they laughed.

"Do you know what I really like about her, Mother?" Steve said. "Maybe it's the only thing I like about her—I couldn't be sure. But this one I'm sure of. It keeps me spellbound. It's the way she explains herself. Her explanations are so implausible and so fascinating."

"I've noticed it," Mrs. Delafield said. "She doesn't quite make sense but you always know what she means. . . . But you didn't tell us, Steve. What is the nicest sound in the world?"

"I spoke a little off guard. It's not really the nicest. It's the next-to-nicest. The next-to-the-nicest sound in the world is beautiful."

"What, Steve?"

"A bomb. A bomb going off. The explosion. The racket."

We kept on looking at him but we didn't speak.

"Because it exploded, dear little ignoramuses," he said. "Because you heard it go off. If you heard it go off, it didn't hit you. . . . You don't hear anything when it hits you. It hits you before it goes off. . . . The plane is ten or maybe fifteen miles away by that time. You saw the plane. You're waiting for it. And then you hear it. It's loud, but it's a symphony. It may be a noisy symphony but it's darned good music."

We didn't say anything for a while. It didn't sound musical to me. I was glad the bomb hadn't hit him—but it was anything but musical. Mrs. Delafield didn't say anything either.

"What's the nicest?" I said finally. "If that's second-best we're not going to like first-best either, but we may as well have it. What's first-best?"

"The first-best—the Number One First-Best—Mother, you'd better leave the room. These things are not for your gentle ears."

"I was just going for a fresh pot of coffee," she said. "I know it's something improper and heaven knows I have no desire to hear improper things at my age."

She took the coffee pot and closed the door.

"The first-best sound in the world," Steve said immediately, "and God knows I seldom hear it! It's when you say you love me. You hardly ever say it. Why don't you, Cherry? You have so very little time to say it in. You're wasting our few little hours by the minute but you don't say it."

"I love you," I said. "I love you—terribly. I wish I didn't. . . . Oh, no, I don't, Steve. I don't wish it at all! I'm glad I do! I love you!"

"That's better, darling. That's much better. You waste so many words on things that don't mean much—except that they always mean something to me."

"I love you so much. What do you want me to do? Do you want me to come over there and take hold of you—and make you kiss me—and say—"

"Yes, darling, that's what I want. But hold it awhile. We'll duck off upstairs pretty soon. In the meantime, just say it. And if there's an audience, just think it."

Mrs. Delafield knocked on the door. "Steve," she called, "if you've finished with the traveling salesman and the farmer's daughter, may I bring hot coffee—for my little pseudo-daughter?"

It was happiness, in a way. There was plenty of laughter. I suppose it was happiness. But it was a kind of sick happiness. Yet we kept on laughing a little, sometimes, and talking a good deal.

"How about today, Steve? It's your last day. Have you made any plans?" Mrs. Delafield asked.

"Oh, don't make any plans for me," Steve said. "I shan't be available. I have a date today. I have a date with Doris."

Mrs. Delafield's smile stopped just where it was. She didn't move. For the first time I knew what it meant to hold everything. She held it. I couldn't help laughing. "You're welcome to it if you can stand it, Steve," I said. "Some of them are ghastly. Larry went camera-mad for a while and tagged us around from bathroom to bed to ice-box and back again and some of them were so bad he had to learn to develop them himself or it would have been against the law. He has some dandies of Dorry, too, but she won't show you those. Just the worm-eaten ones of me."

"Oh!" Mrs. Delafield said. "You're going to look at Cherry's pictures!" There was such relief in her voice that Steve and I laughed.

"You do such odd things, and say such odd things, you can't wonder if you keep us guessing," she explained hurriedly.

"Mother, Cherry herself couldn't have given a worse explanation. You don't make sense but we know what you mean."

"You should have seen him kissing her left blue pump last night," I said comfortingly. "Dorry is very conservative. She wouldn't give him the right one."

We drove out to the Careys' farmhouse that day, Steve and I. We took their car. I drove. We stopped by all our precious rendezvous, the tree, the bridge, the creeks; we hadn't many. We didn't say anything important. Most of it I don't remember at all. I remember that when we started out he said, "Have you any feeling against the crutches? I can get along without them, if you have any feeling about them."

"The only feeling I have is that I think you're crazy to go without them when your legs need them," I said.

He took them.

I asked him how it was that he had happened to like me better than the big girls.

"I didn't," he said. "I don't. I don't like you a bit better. The only difference is that I love you."

I asked why.

He said, "Are we so regimented that we have to show a yardstick for size and a calendar for age before we fall in love?"

I couldn't think of anything to say to that so I didn't say anything.

After what seemed a long time he said, "I think I know what you mean, Cherry. It all lies with me. I'm changed. I'm out of step. I'm completely out of step with civilians, and what you call 'big girls' are civilians. I'm out of step with anyone not in service. The boys here that haven't been out yet—we don't exactly speak the same language—but I know what they're going up against and they know I know it. So we look at each other and say nothing and get along very well. Anyone who's been over—that's all right. We mark the same time. I don't care where, I don't care what branch—we speak the same language. And what our language says is, What the hell's the matter over here? And 'over here' is home, Cherry. Don't forget that. There's nothing the matter over there, except maybe with a few brass hats feeling their oats and a few quite understandable mistakes. Maybe it's because we belong over there and can understand the mistakes there; maybe it's because we don't belong here any more and can't make out what's the matter with everybody."

"Steve," I said, speaking gently because he seemed rather wrought-up, "Steve, if you don't like—well, civilians, Americans, us, Steve—I'm one, too!—why do you want to keep on fighting for us? Risking your life . . ."

"It isn't any kind of dislike, Cherry. I just don't get them. I don't understand it but it seems to me they're cluttering up their minds and their time with things that aren't worth a tinker's damn. There's such an unreality about everything here. Not over there. There's no unreality there. Inside me, there's a grimness. It's not hatred. It's not bitterness. It's not patriotism either. It's just grimness. I suppose the first guy that skyrockets himself to Mars will feel the way I do—out of step—out of tune—grim."

There didn't seem to be any answer so I didn't say anything.

"You seem as out of step with it as I am," he said. "I know you're not. I know you're quite in touch with all that's going on here. But you seem real. You seem concrete. Maybe it's because you're too young to be cluttered up with nonessentials. What do you consider really essential, Cherry?"

"You," I said quickly without thinking. And then I thought. "There are lots of essentials, Steve. There's having our country and our homes and our friends—and the right to be religious if anybody wants to—but mostly it comes back to you."

"Do you see what I mean, darling? You are clear, concise and to the point. Nobody else is. You want our country what it is supposed to be; you want your home and your family and your friends; you want religion for 'them as like it'; and you want love free and pure."

I didn't say a word. If anything I had said sounded as wise and logical as that I wasn't going to mess it up with a syllable.

Later he said, "The oddest thing of the whole odd layout is Mother. I can't see that she's changed personally; but to me she seems a different mother. I guess it all harks back to the change in me. When we were living together, I felt toward her—maybe it was the way I feel now about these others, these civvies and the 'big girls.' That it was all form, all politeness. Nothing intimate and tangible between us. She was nice to me and I was nice to her. That's all. We lived together because by some accident of birth we were born to each other and there was nothing we could do about it."

"Don't you feel that way now?"

"Not at all that way. And yet I can't see that she's changed. She seems very real and personal to me now. I feel some grimness in her, as in myself. I can't put my finger on it but I know it's there."

It was quiet and pleasant and comforting, maybe. But a little sad. There was nothing in particular to be sad about at the moment, except that it gave me a more anxious feeling about Larry—and Slim for Dorry's sake.

We went back to our house and Dorry took Steve upstairs to look at the pictures and to show him my room. I talked to Mother and Dad and skimmed through my mail. It was all dull. Then Dad went over to fetch Mrs. Delafield for dinner and afterward we sat around the fireplace in the living room and talked. We really talked that night. Dad asked a lot of questions about the war and Steve did not as usual ease himself away from questions with a few vague words. He answered them. He answered them in a way that brought more questions.

He said he liked the fighter planes better than the big bombers, and

he had had a go with them all. He said with the "big babies" you felt that you were a minor pinwheel in a piece of superduper machinery, but a fighter was part of your own body, part of your uniform. Still answering questions, he got onto the subject of their missions over the Channel. Then we sat very still and listened.

"We have separate bases, you know, the fighters and the bombers. They get their orders and we get ours. I get them for my squadron. We are to take off at a certain time. It isn't an hour, it's a minute. We are to pick up the bombers at a certain point at a specified instant. We are to carry them along to a certain point. If it's a big mission, a long distance, another escort will pick them up and we head for home. The fighters can make only a specified distance, because they carry only so much gas. You hate like the devil to turn back without seeing it through, but that isn't your job. And you never forget that you've got just enough gas for just so many miles. So you head back.

"The leader of the squadron sets the course. As nearly as possible he follows the orders given him but he has some leeway. If he spots anything out of line anywhere he can change the course and zigzag as his judgment dictates, praying to God his judgment is right.

"It's an odd thing about your squadron. Some of them are older than you are and some are better fliers. But they're yours. You give them a little hell now and then but you love them like flesh and blood.

"My first outfit got pretty badly broken. There were some weak spots in our first boats and we took plenty of punishment. They sent me replacements several times but we were going over hot and fast. Always when you get back, you stand and watch them coming in. You count them. The chiefs are all out, too, standing there, waiting, counting them one by one as they come in. They knew how many took off. There is no sleep for anyone until they know how many came back.

"Sometimes one will limp in alone hours later. I suppose it is the same in all outfits; I know my order never changes. I am to be awakened to get the news when one of mine comes in.

"After my first outfit had been shot to pieces, I was ordered off to a new squadron at another base. Their leader had not come back and I was sent to replace him. What was left of mine, only eight

out of eighteen, was split up and scattered around in other squadrons. I was bitter about it. I wanted them to let me keep what I had left and fill it up with replacements. I thought I was entitled to keep what I had. I cursed the brass hats from the steel in their boots to the silver on their shoulders. But I had to go. When I called the new squadron in, they followed regulations to the letter, but they were sullen. So was I. Usually, among us, there isn't all that red tape and standing on ceremony and raising a stink about dog tags and ties and precedence like goes on in the Army. We're all about the same age and about the same type and rank among us is mostly a matter of luck. There's hardly ever any pulling rank in our branch. I never ran across any myself, either from above or from below. But that day, we reeked of military procedure. I knew I had to break it down and I knew it could never be done by any show of authority, so I gave it to them straight.

"Listen," I said, "I know you are hating my guts. And don't think I'm not hating yours. I know you lost your leader. He was a friend of mine and a swell guy. I know you don't want me in his place. My squadron was shot to hell but I had eight men left, eight of the best. I wanted those men. I wanted to keep them. But the Tops did not see it that way. They wished me off on you and you off on me. I don't like it any better than you do but I've got to take it and so have you. That's all today."

"I got out of there before they could draw a full breath."

"What happened?" asked Doris.

"They sent a new guy in to see me. He was a green replacement, had never seen a mission. He said, 'Sir, there's a place down the road where they've got some real old English ale. The boys thought we might beat it down there tonight and raise a little hell for auld lang syne.'

"I said, 'Thank you, Lieutenant, I think you've got something there. Whatever time you say.' So we went. But if that was old English ale, I'm a Chinese baby that isn't born yet. God, it's a swell outfit—what's left of it! I don't suppose I'll ever see them again. I'll never see them together again. But it's still my outfit. And all I ask of Heaven when I get there is to give me my outfit again. I can do

without harps and halos. Just give me my outfit and some old P38s and plenty of ammunition and we'll bomb hell out of hell."

We sat there. We sat there like fools, spellbound fools. Steve lit a cigarette. "Maybe I talk too fast," he said slowly, in a different voice. "There *is* something else I'm asking heaven for! Maybe I'd get quicker action if I asked you!"

Nobody said anything.

"First of all, first of everything, I want Cherry," Steve said, still speaking in that slow strange voice. "I'd like to have the outfit and the 38s thrown in for good measure but I'd like Cherry first."

Dad cleared his throat. Mother, both mothers, looked straight at him. Neither of them moved. Dorry leaned forward in her chair. She was the only one who looked at Steve. Dad's eyes were on the ceiling and mine were on the floor.

"I thought maybe you might consider—letting us get married during this leave," Steve said gently. "God knows when I'll get another one."

Dad was in a tough spot. You couldn't believe that two mothers and two girls could unite in such an utter silence.

He cleared his throat again. After Mother had scared him out of groaning, he got his chief relief in throat-clearing. This time, it was from his feet up. "Steve," he said hoarsely, "we understand how you feel—or comparatively so. If Cherry is old enough to think she's in love, I suppose she's old enough to get married. . . . But she's not through school. . . . We don't know what this world is going to be when this war is over—" His voice gained confidence once he got on this firmer ground. "We don't know what it's going to be, but whatever it is, it's going to be a sadder world and so it's got to be a wiser world, a wiser and more understanding world."

He did all right by the world; it was when he was cornered down to us, there in that room, that his voice went bad. "This world," he went on, "this new world that we are going to be when the war's over, is going to take everything we've got. It's going to take more than we've ever given it. It's going to take all we can muster up to give it."

"Yes, I know," Steve said. "It's welcome to all I've got. But I

could give it more, I think, if I had Cherry! . . . But I wouldn't give it Cherry! I would not! 'All right,' I'd say, 'go to the dogs if you want to, but you can't have her!'"

Dad started to laugh but quickly remembered the spot he was in. "What are you up to anyhow?" he said irritably. "Are you proposing to her or to the world?"

"I'm not proposing at all, sir," Steve said. "I'm just asking you."

I went across the room and sat on Dad's lap. He let me sit there but he didn't touch me. "Dad," I said, "maybe that's what's the matter. Maybe that's why I have such a sick feeling all the time, even when I'm the most happy."

"Nobody told me you had a sick feeling!" he said indignantly.

"Nobody told me," I said. "I didn't know that's what it was. But if we were married, Dad, he couldn't get rid of me—he'd have to come back to me."

I was a little upset. Everybody was a little upset. But I always keep my eyes open. Dad looked across at Steve. I looked, too, under my lashes. Steve gave his head a short, sharp, negative shake.

Mother said, "Dad, if you can stand it, I can. We're standing everything else. If it's all right with you, it's all right with me. If she's old enough to love him, she's old enough to marry him."

Dad had to work hard but he finally got his throat cleared enough for his voice to get through. "I must say, Cherry, I haven't . . . so far . . . seen any sign . . . any particular sign . . . that he's trying to get rid of you."

"Yes, he is trying. He is beginning to try already. I saw him shake his head at you! Yes, I did, Steve; don't you deny it. You shook your head at him."

There was another painful, silent silence. Mrs. Delafield did not move, did not flicker a lash, kept on looking at Steve. Mother looked at Steve. Steve looked very foolish. Dad looked at him, too, obviously hoping for another wigwag. Only Doris looked at me. I didn't mind her looking at me. She didn't smile. She just looked.

"Cherry," Dad finally got through the frog in his throat, "do you want . . . so very much . . . to get married?"

"No, I don't want it very much," I said. "I just want to make sure that it won't be easy for him—to keep away from me."

Steve got up suddenly. He came over where we were. There was a footstool beside the chair and he moved it around and sat down on it, carefully, because stooping hurt him. I was still on Dad's lap. When Steve started toward us Dad put his arms around me; he hadn't touched me before. Steve, down on the stool, put one hand up on my arm.

"All right, all right," he said, in his grimmest squadron-leader voice, "I asked for it and I'm getting it! I asked for it, Cherry, because I want it more than I have ever wanted anything in my life. But I didn't intend to ask for it. Not tonight! I was saving it up for better times. But it came out. And you are quite right, Cherry: I shook my head at him. I wanted to warn him. I want it, but I know I shouldn't have it. I know I've got to go back. And nobody will ever know better than I do that there may not be any more coming home. So . . . I shouldn't have it, they shouldn't let me have it. But that doesn't keep me from wanting it! I didn't know I was going to ask it. You've all let me talk too much tonight. I hope Dorry is asking God to forgive me. . . ."

"I'm doing no such thing!" Doris said briskly. "I think you're all crazy! If I ever get hold of Slim again, don't any of you think for one minute that I'm going to mark time and say, 'Please, may I?' I'm not even going to ask Slim! I'm going to yank him off to the first preacher I can get hold of—and he's going to be my Slim. It may be only a month. It may be only five minutes. But for five minutes he's going to be my Slim!" She hesitated, but since we all sat there voiceless and breathless she went on. "Don't expect me to pull any of this old-fashioned polite stuff, as Steve here did, the silly dunce. I can't imagine what Cherry sees in him! Slim belongs to me and it's nobody else's business. Steve must be some kind of a throw-back to the Middle Ages. I feel sorry for Cherry. . . . But Dad, you remember now: Once I get hold of Slim again, don't expect any 'May I?' What you're going to get is a 'Here you are, Dad. Take it or leave it. I'm taking it.'"

The silence was terrible.

"Did any of you ever seriously consider the Mormon religion?" Steve asked. He smiled faintly, but his voice was husky. "There's a lot to be said for the Mormon religion. If we should take it on, I could marry the whole darned family."

"I wouldn't wish that on Hitler!" Dad said furiously. "I can get along with the girls—part of the time—if they come at me one at a time. But if they ever gang up with their mother—"

Another loud silence. Only Steve could break silences like that. "I think you're probably right, Dorry," he said. "Absolutely right! You remember I told you before, Cherry, that I was a flop. Larry and Slim, they know their way around much better. I wonder where they learned it; from sisters, I suppose. You've taught me a good deal too, Cherry.... But doesn't she seem a little young, Dorry?"

"No! She doesn't seem at all young to me! You can't be in love until you are a woman and as soon as you get to be a woman you quit counting your age by years. I don't think she's at all young!"

We sat there. Dad was holding me close, a little away from Steve. But Steve still had his arm up against mine. I didn't really want to get married—right away. I hadn't even thought about it before. But now that it had come up so suddenly I wanted very much to do something so that Steve, wherever he went, however long he stayed away, would sometime have to come back to me. And there wasn't anything but marriage that would make sure of it!

"I hope you're not expecting to do any such thing today!" Dad said accusingly.

"Nothing is farther from my expectation—or closer to my wishes," Steve said.

"You haven't got a license anyhow," Doris said brightly. "You have to have licenses for these things. I know. I've asked. When I see Slim, it's going to be with license in pocketbook."

"I could arrange that—" Dad cut himself off so short he almost strangled. "When are you going to get another leave, Steve?"

"I don't know, sir," Steve said.

"Stop 'sirring' me," Dad said furiously. "I'm no commanding officer. I wish I was! A commanding officer has a kindergarten life of it, compared with what I go through. You've got to be here quite

a while, haven't you? You can't very well win the war until you can walk on both legs, can you?"

"I couldn't exactly win it," Steve said, "but I can still push a stick and turn screws and push buttons. That's about all it is."

"How long are you going to be home this stretch?"

"One never knows, sir. I think at least six months. You can't believe all you hear but all they kept telling us over there was, 'When you get it, it'll be a six-months' stretch.' Since I have to take treatment for a while they may spin it out and give me eight. But from everything I've seen so far, the Army is no Santa Claus."

"When can you get away again, Steve?" Dorry asked.

"If it's for anything like this," Steve said, "just set a date! I'll make it. I'll go AWOL and stick around tomorrow if you like. They can hang onto their test tubes and hypodermics awhile. I don't mind a step back and that's the worst they can do."

"No," Doris said firmly. "We don't care what happens to you, but if I'm running this show—and I am—there are not going to be any MP's crashing Cherry's honeymoon."

"There's plenty of time," Dad said soothingly. "You've got six months. She can skim along through high school. As far as I know that's all she's ever done anyhow. You'll still have a couple of months to spare. Not," he added hastily, "that I approve of any of this! I'm coerced; I'm coerced. But there isn't any hurry. You've got six months. She will be through high school by that time. Maybe she can read and write. I hope so. . . . Steve, it's all right with us."

When they were ready to go home Mother said she thought I'd better not go that night; in the circumstances she thought maybe it wouldn't look just right.

"It's our last night, Helen," Mrs. Delafield said. "We love having her there. And she sleeps all right."

"But in the circumstances—" Mother said.

"Let's call the engagement off," Steve said. "Let's call it off for the evening. I'll propose to her again first thing tomorrow. But tonight she's a perfect stranger."

"She couldn't be," Mother protested. "You know her too well."

"Mother, how can you be so stingy?" Doris said. "Maybe they

will go home and hold hands for a while and both go to sleep over it. What difference does it make? What difference does it make if they don't—quite go to sleep over it? Anyhow, Mother, if you make her stay here, I'm going to split up one of your best sheets and tie it in knots and make a ladder and let her down from my window. Mother," she said, "we haven't as much time—as we used to have."

Mother let me go. We were quiet in the car driving back. I can't remember that anybody said anything. I was frightened. I think they were frightened, too. We went straight upstairs to our rooms. After quite a while Mrs. Delafield came to my door.

"Cherry," she said, "I'm sorry about this. Steve brought it on and you didn't expect it. I know you're too young. I know it isn't right. But it will be six months, Cherry. You will be—oh, my dear—you will be so *little* older in six months! Cherry, hate me if you have to. But he wants you so much I'm going to let him have you. You're going to be hurt, Honey; war is very hurtful."

"It hurts me anyhow," I said. "I've been hurt almost since I can remember. I was hurt about Larry. I'm hurt about Slim. But it wasn't the same! It wasn't at all the same! Steve hurts me more than anybody."

"Yes. He's going to hurt you more. Maybe if they weren't so acquiescent—your parents, Cherry—maybe you wouldn't be hurt so much. But maybe more, Cherry. I don't know. I don't know anything. Will you go in and say good night to him?"

"Yes, of course."

When I went in to say good night he was lying very still, with his eyes closed and his arms over his face. I knelt down beside the bed and took his head in my arms.

"Steve," I said, "you don't have to marry me. You can leave me whenever you want to and I won't say a word."

He turned over and laughed; not that wry laugh; real laughter. He said, "Darling, I'm not trying to get rid of you. I'm just trying to work up enough nobility not to pull a fast one on them and marry you tonight."

"We can't," I said. "We haven't got a license."

"All right, all right, I'll be noble if I have to, damn it. Who would

ever have dreamed they would take it on the chin like that? I'd like to run up against a few Messerschmitts as soft as they are. I suppose it was your angelic little Doris that turned the trick my way."

"She thought you wanted to," I said. "She was trying to please you. Why did you ever bring it up in the first place? You took us all so by surprise we didn't know what to say."

"Darling," he said, "it isn't right. They're going to let me do it and I am going to do it. But will you try to remember, years and years from now, that I knew it wasn't right and I warned you? I am not warning you very urgently and I am not going to warn you at all any more. I'm going to do it! But later on, if you aren't always very happy, will you try to remember that I tried to warn you? And if anything should happen—"

"What could happen, Steve? Hasn't everything happened already?"

"Anything can happen! Not here, darling! Not in a glamour-puss movie where everything turns out just right in the best of all possible worlds. But there are places where there's a war going on. Anything can happen there. And remember that it's what I'm part of, a small part. And will you remember this most especially? That no matter what happens, my heart is married to your heart. We haven't got a license, we haven't got a preacher, and we're being so damned good I'd like to kick myself from here to Berlin and back again. But my heart is married to yours. . . . But some places, a long way off, where there's war, love doesn't always have a happy ending."

"You don't seem at all happy, Steve."

"I am happy. I have never been so happy—and so miserable—in my life. They go hand in hand and don't you forget it. But you haven't learned that lesson yet. It's the postgraduate course."

"If you kissed me more and talked less, you'd feel more cheerful, Steve. You always feel more cheerful when you kiss me."

He kissed me. Not really kissing. His lips moving against mine and his finger at the corner of my mouth. When his breathing changed and I knew he was asleep, I got up quietly and went down to my own room—my room in his house.

## XIV

STEVE WAS sent from Halloran to Atlantic City as he had expected. We talked of going down to see him but he was always expecting to get his accrued leave so we put it off. He wrote to me every day and sent me little things, some nice and some ridiculous to make me laugh. He had little combs made up for me with blue cornflowers.

I felt shy with my old friends; I felt shy with everyone. I began to understand what he meant about his feeling toward us, us civilians. The grimness. I began to feel grimness in me, too. I began resenting things I heard, on the street, over the radio, among my friends. The headlines in the newspapers irritated me. I forgave Dad for having been disturbed by them and thought he had been heroic to give up justified groaning just to please Mother. There was a kind of aloofness in me. The old familiar things, the old familiar friends, seemed strange and unreal. Not glamour-puss! Definitely not glamour-puss! But strange.

Steve gained five pounds. Then eight pounds. Walking no longer hurt him and he had discarded the crutches. He still limped slightly but there was no pain.

Then he reported that he had been "boarded." He was ordered back to active duty.

We didn't like that but there was nothing we could do about it. Steve said he would be assigned to some post and would have to take his leave from there. It seemed complicated and extravagant to us. He might be assigned to a post in California or Oregon or Utah and would have to make the long trip out there just to sign in, and then sign out and take the long trip back home.

We said no wonder travel was so congested if they were using it up at that rate when he could be home from Atlantic City in two hours. We said it was a gross imposition on our armed forces, and not at all healthful, for them to sleep in stuffy corridors and women's lavatories and wait hours between trains in drafty, crowded railroad stations. I

was indignant. I forgot all about upsetting Mother and said Dad had been absolutely right in the beginning; it *was* a wasteful and extravagant administration and they didn't know the first thing about winning a war and the taxpayers had a right to grouse their heads off.

But it wasn't the taxpayers' money that bothered me. It was Steve. I wanted him home on leave. If he had been in Burma I wouldn't have given a thought to the taxpayers' money if he could just get home on leave.

Then I got a telegram from him.

"Chase the wolves off the front porch, Honey-Squirt. You'll be having a heavy date around eight-thirty tonight."

I thought my heart would stop beating. I thought it had stopped. My hands shook. My knees were shaking too. I was ashamed for having thought Mrs. Delafield was a silly nervous old woman that day when he came home. I was a silly nervous old woman myself.

"Do you think his legs . . . might have had a relapse?" I asked.

"Of course not! He'd have told you. It's just the wild way the Army does things. They kept him hanging in mid-air for weeks waiting for his leave and then they chucked it at him before he had time to make a decent date!"

I dressed carefully. Doris helped me. I was still excited but it was happy excitement. She put the cornflower combs in my hair and reminded me that they were combs and not extra ear lobes.

He was there at eight-thirty. He hardly limped at all. You wouldn't have noticed it except that it made him seem a little more distinguished, not like other people. He had one piece of good news but he didn't seem very cheerful about it. He was to report in on Monday morning at Philadelphia. Philadelphia was next door to New Jersey, not far away. That seemed wonderful, for I had been thinking about California and Oregon and Utah. But I noticed he wasn't very cheerful about it.

He was vague about everything else. He didn't know what outfit he was going into, he didn't know what he was supposed to do when he got there, and he hadn't the remotest idea when, if ever, he would get the accrued leave.

I didn't understand the Army at all. He had been over there and got wounded and had every kind of decoration you could think of and had no end of accrued leave coming to him but it never seemed to enter the War Department's head that he would like to get home long enough to kick his own dog around. He didn't have a dog, but the War Department didn't know that. I was so fed up with the War Department I would certainly have pulled a fast one on it if I could; but I couldn't think of any way to get ahead of it.

"I thought you said," I said carefully, "that as soon as you report in to a new post you automatically get your accrued leave."

"That's what I thought," he said. "That's what it says in the books. But that is not the way it's sizing up right now. It's just possible they think it's more important to win the war than to give me leave to make love."

"You're not well enough to stand all that tough Army gaff," I protested. "You're hardly back on your legs yet."

"I'm only a flier, you know. I don't have to hike it and carry my plane on my shoulders. They may break down and give me a pillow for the rough air pockets."

I was sorry about the leave but I was too happy to be very sorry. There was tonight and Saturday and Sunday. And the accrued leave loomed sweetly away in the offing.

"I don't suppose," Steve said diffidently, looking at Dad, "that if I turned loose with my best combination of Winston and F. D. R. oratory, you would break down to the point of making it this week end, would you?"

I held my breath.

"Don't try it," Dad said. But he said it in a friendly way. "I take a lot of pride in my stern parenthood but I doubt if I could hold out against that combination."

"I don't blame you at all," Steve said. "I feel the same way. But—there seems so little time."

"You've still got six months," Dad said. "I think we ought to get her out of the infant class first."

"Yes, I know. But there isn't much time, sir."

"I wish I merited that 'sir'! There's nothing I'd like better than to give a few orders that somebody might conceivably carry out!"

"It wouldn't hurt for you to take a few orders too, Steve," I said. He saluted smartly. "Okay, General. Shell them out."

"Well, keep your wits about you," I said.

When they laughed I realized it was a good deal of an anticlimax so I tried to do better. "You've got to get over that silly notion that it's up to you to win the war alone and singlehanded. A little help wouldn't do you any harm in a pinch."

"Right!"

"You might think of others once in a while, too. If you do it all by yourself what are the others going to brag about to their grandchildren when it's over?"

"There's something in that. Not to cheat future generations of legitimate pride in ancestral achievements, I promise to accept assistance in choice spots."

Presently the others got up and went off upstairs. They mentioned specifically things they really had to get done but we knew they were giving us a chance to be alone. And we didn't protest. I sat beside him on the sofa.

"Are you a great big grown-up girl now, Cherry?" he asked after he had loved me a while. "Are you grown-up enough to—stand everything?"

"No!" I said, frightened again. "I'll never be grown-up enough to stand everything! What do I have to stand?"

"A lot of kissing right now," he said cheerfully.

"I can stand that," I said, but I was still uneasy. "What do I have to stand next week?"

"Getting a lot of letters and penny post cards and telephone calls from me."

"When do I have to stand—the hard things?"

"I don't know, darling. Nobody knows. I just want you to be ready for them when the time comes."

"Steve, did you tell me the truth? When that Board . . . boarded you . . . did they really say you are all right again and your legs are all right?"

"Yes, the absolute truth. I'm inclined now to regret it. They wouldn't be sending me back to active duty if I weren't all right, or comparatively so. But I didn't tell you the whole truth. I neglected

to add that I love you so much I feel you in the air I breathe, and touch you with my hands and lips when you're miles away, and you are wrapped up in all the sweet scents of flowers and the music of birds and pipe organs and in the blackness of night you outshine the brightest stars. It's lovely, when necessary; but I wish it were not necessary so much of the time! Is that enough truth or will you have more?"

"I will have more; and I will have the same truth over and over and over as long as we live."

I was easily comforted.

He and his mother came by for us the next morning and picked us up to go to church together and save a coupon. When we got to the pew, Dad and Steve stood back and Mother and Mrs. Delafield went in first and Dorry slipped in ahead of me. Steve was standing back for Dad but Dad made a slight gesture with his hand and Steve came in beside me. I felt confused at first and could feel the red on my face and throat, and my hands felt prickly.

But after the first embarrassment, I was proud. It was telling our town and our church and our friends, it was almost like telling God, that Steve and I belonged to each other. I had never felt so religious in my life. I wished I had brought all my money to put in the collection, but then I was glad I hadn't because it would have looked like showing off before Steve, although I didn't mean it that way. I decided to do it next Sunday, when he would not be there, and I would not even tell him about it. Then I decided to divide it and put half into war bonds to rush the war along as fast as possible. Then I decided to make it thirds and cut the Red Cross in, too, because he said they were wonderful when he was sick in England and they had been such a help with Larry before he escaped.

I didn't know what Steve was thinking of course, but when Dr. Gayne prayed the long prayer where we remained sitting, he put his hand over on mine. I never prayed so hard in my life. I promised to be as good as possible and asked God to help me, for although I felt very good right then I knew I would need help. I asked him to be around wherever Larry was and take care of him, and to take care of Slim too, because Dorry loved him. I'm not sure but I asked him to take care of the whole Army and Navy and save as many of

them as possible. I was so wrapped up in it that I didn't hear Dr. Gayne say "Amen" and when the congregation stood up to sing the *Gloria* I jumped as if a bomb had gone off right under me.

Steve took us all to dinner at a very nice place out on the highway. I asked why he didn't make it Pinky's Place but he said he was saving that for dates with the big girls when I walked out on him. It was very nice. When he got to the house again it was half past three.

"Look at that clock!" I said indignantly. "Why, Sunday is almost over! You're as good as gone!"

I went over and turned the hand back three hours. Mother and Dad and Doris laughed but Steve looked a little grim. "If it were only as easy as that!" he said.

We drove out to the Careys' farm and they were excited and pleased and flattered as they always were when he paid them attentions.

"God bless you, Colonel, God bless you," Mrs. Carey said soberly. She was holding the smallest baby in her arm and had the other hand on the leash of the biggest dog. The dog had taken a great fancy to Steve and was always licking his uniform if he couldn't reach his face. "And God bless you, too, Cherry," she added slowly. "God's dearest blessing for you!"

They all looked hushed and solemn but I felt thrilled and happy. I knew that already, though I was so young, He had showered me with His dearest blessings.

We went back to our house and stayed there, all talking together, until eight-thirty and then Steve and I drove on over to Mrs. Delafield's. He had to take the train at eleven-thirty to make his connections for Philadelphia.

Mrs. Delafield had a lovely little supper laid out for us. I should have realized then that I was greatly changed. One of the things I had liked most about her in the beginning was that she always had a good supply of delicious refreshments. That night, the sight of the food almost made me sick. I couldn't imagine how anyone could think of food when we were all so full to overflowing with other things, things so much sweeter, more satisfying. More filling, too!

Midnight leaped at us and he was gone again. Mrs. Delafield took me home and waited until I had gone in—to keep me from being

bashed in ambush, I suppose. When I got into the living room, I noticed that no one had touched the hands of the clock. It was still three hours slow, as I had set it. I went over, before I took off my wraps, and turned it back to the proper place. No more slow time for me! I wanted it to be fast, I wanted it to gallop, I wanted it to fly.

Steve wrote every day but said very little about that place and what he was doing there. He said the food was good and he had met some officers he had known on the other side and he was feeling fine. Mostly he talked about us, how much he loved me, things like that. More and more, the war began creeping into his letters, what he had noticed in the papers, what different men were saying, reports that trickled in from what he called "confidential sources." It wasn't so much the things he said, but the crisp phrasing, the short sentences, the breaking off in the middle of a paragraph, that told me the grimness was getting into him again.

I reassured myself. I said it was because he was back on active duty, associated again with those others who had been over, like himself, and knew there was nothing but grimness in their war.

I did not know then that it was not a regular post assignment he had been given. I did not know he was in a replacement pool, waiting until they shipped him off again.

Early in February he wired that he would be home late Saturday night for a week end and told me to see there was no wolf-parking for he was in no mood to bandy bullets.

But he didn't have a week end. He had just twenty-four hours.

It was after eleven when he got to our house. I had primped a good deal and wore a new dress with the cornflower combs he had given me. It wasn't until afterward that I remembered there had been a good deal of constraint when he came in, and that although they had stayed in and waited up expressly to see him, none of them had much of anything to say, though usually quite talkative. I was too pleased and excited to notice such details then. Ordinarily small things would be details, but that night they were not. But I still did not notice.

After they had gone upstairs I sat with him on the sofa. He caressed me gently. "Are you getting more grown-up every day?" he asked.

"I'm as grown-up as the big girls now," I said boastfully. "And I've got more sense than most of them. Dad says so, too." Then I remembered and added quickly, "But I'm not grown-up enough to stand any hard things—just nice ones."

He laughed. "Oh, yes, you are, darling. Yes, you are. You've stood all this uncertainty about Larry, haven't you? You stood it when you thought I was short a couple of legs, didn't you? Sure, you can stand the hard things!"

"What hard things?"

"Being lonesome and worried. Not being kissed much for a while. Being true and loyal to somebody you may not see for a long, long time. Not getting letters very often. Holding me nice and warm in your heart when maybe sometimes for weeks you will not know whether I'm alive or dead. As it was with Larry, darling. You can stand it."

I got up and moved across the room away from him. "Steve, you're not going back over there! Not yet!"

"Looks like it, Honey. . . . Oh, not for a while. I don't know just when. You see, darling, a certain brass hat promised them more fliers than he had on hand. So he's laying hand on them as fast as possible."

"So they're sending you back. . . ."

"Me and a few others, darling. I haven't forgotten my General Orders. I flatly and unequivocally decline to do the job alone!"

I couldn't smile. I went and sat by him again, as close as I could get. "Steve, after all you did, and your wounds, and your decorations, couldn't you resign?"

"Maybe I could, darling. I might get away with it—I doubt it."

"Didn't you ask?"

"No, I didn't."

"You said you'd have at least six months!" I said accusingly. "School would be out . . . and Dad said . . . Steve, we could do it tomorrow!"

"I recall being informed on a certain occasion that we couldn't—we didn't have a license!"

"We could do it without a license! Dad could bribe somebody to cover it up for us."

"You are growing up, aren't you! More sense in your little finger than in all the big girls tied up together!"

"Steve, will you?"

"No, Cherry. This isn't any twenty-four-hour job! It's for life! Now, Honey, they've already changed their minds on me two or three dozen times. They are more apt than not to change them again. I may be here six months. I may get the leave. God knows they owe it to me. I suppose they figure I got all the fun I needed in the hospital letting them pull my legs. But there's still a chance. The two most uncertain things in the world are the weather and the War Department. I'm transferring down to Langley Field."

He had gone home first and told his mother. She, always so thoughtful, had called my mother, to explain that we must make the most of the stingy twenty-four hours.

"I told them not to tell you," he said, "because I wanted to tell you myself. I wanted to see with my own eyes if you are growing up as fast as you can, for my sake."

"I'm entirely grown-up now," I said wretchedly. "I am as old and sad as Mother! And as your mother!"

"Yes, I know. You'll never be a kid any more. In some ways I'm sorry to see you kiss your childhood good-by."

I didn't care about that. I was thinking that in such a few hours I would be kissing him good-by. I glanced at the clock. But I didn't feel like turning it back for a playful prank. I didn't feel at all playful.

He didn't know where he would be going. He thought it would seem so reasonable to send him back to England, where he was familiar with flying conditions and knew the coastal area, that he was quite sure they would never think of it. Maybe Iceland, where he would have to start from scratch again.

"It doesn't make any difference to me," he said. "Since I have to be away from you, I don't care where they send me."

"I care. It makes a great difference to me. I want to know just how things look, where you are, the houses and the trees and the people, the barracks you sleep in, the streets you walk through, the plane you're flying."

"I'll tell you as much as I can, Sweet. Just at first I cannot say where I'm located because they don't want it to leak through what outfits are landing, or where they're stationed. Read my first letters carefully. I'll try to put in little hints. I can always describe the girls! The censors would be suspicious immediately if there were no mention of girls!"

"Where do you want to go? . . . I mean, if you had a choice."

"England, I think. It doesn't really make any difference but I'm used to the layout there. And of course that's where the Invasion will push off from."

"Do you have to do the invading?" I said bitterly. "Couldn't you be satisfied with a few quiet little jobs like blowing up bridges or trains or munition dumps?"

"My part of it will be a little job—too little, I'm afraid. But we really were rather looking forward to Berlin."

"Look backward sometimes, too," I said. "Just once in a while. Back toward home."

"That's never interrupted, Cherry. It's constant. I wouldn't mind turning my bombsights toward Berlin, but my spiritual eyes will never stray."

We didn't talk much. There was lots of silence, that great ringing silence that seems louder than noise. I wondered if it was that kind of a silence Doris spoke of, the night of her conversion. I even wondered dreamily if maybe I was getting conversion, too. But I thought not. My mind was full of Steve.

He drew me up beside him on the couch until we were half lying on the cushions, his arms around me. My hands held his face, touching mine.

I had felt so sad and frightened and wide awake I was sure I could never close my eyes in sleep again. But I fell asleep, there in his arms. There were tears on our cheeks, his tears or mine.

I heard Mother come downstairs softly. I did not move. Steve lifted his head.

"What you both need is a couple of hours of real sleep," she said cheerfully. "There's a comfortable day bed on the sun porch, Steve."

I shook my head, still holding his face. "Just a couple of hours,

Cherry," she went on. "You want to make the most of every minute of this day, and you can do it better if there's a little sleep behind your eyelids."

She brought one of Larry's old bathrobes and an afghan and blanket for Steve. He went to the sun porch and I to my room. I was aching. I was aching all over. My shoulders, my arms, my feet. I got in bed, in my new dress, with the cornflower combs in my hair. I put the wrist watch against my lips. "Watch the time, watch the time, watch the time," I whispered over and over until I fell asleep.

## XV

WE DID NOT go to church that Sunday. I wouldn't have dared. There is something very sad about church when you are sad. I would have cried, I know I would have cried. But they did not mention our going.

We had breakfast with the family at our house and then went over and had breakfast with Mrs. Delafield. I never saw so much food. I didn't blame the government for slapping us onto ration points if people were determined to gormandize like that.

Dad was going to pick Mrs. Delafield up in time for church—we were still using the cars turn about—but she said her tank was full of gas and suggested that we take the car and go off alone somewhere for the day. We said we would.

After they had gone to church, Steve took me up to his rooms and showed me his things, his decorations and citations and dog tags. He showed me a lot of pictures, too, that he had brought back from England; men of his outfits and their mascots and planes. He gave me several of him.

"Maybe I'm hipped on myself, Cherry, but I thought maybe you'd like to have a regular picture of me. I had some taken for you. I don't want you to forget how I look."

"I'll never forget that," I said, "but I would like to have a real picture of you."

It was a large one, nicely framed, taken in his uniform with insignia and decorations. Beautiful, but it showed all that grimness I was afraid of.

"I have a smaller one," he said. "I couldn't decide between them. This one is not at all martial. More maudlin. I was thinking of you."

I liked it better. "It's the way you look when you've finished kissing me," I said.

"That I will never finish," he said. He kissed me and then compared his looks in the mirror with the photograph. "You're right. There's nothing like kissing to get your mind off flak."

I took both pictures. I took everything he would give me. I wished I could have his civilian clothes at home in my closet where I could look at them. But I didn't mention it.

Before time for them to return from church we got into the car. Steve did the driving. He said he would not put it past me to smash into a tree or telegraph pole to play into the hands of our enemy and derange the morale of our Air Forces. Most of the time we were quiet.

I said, "I thought soldiers always made their last days wild and wicked, crammed with juke boxes and painted ladies and laughter and liquor. . . ."

"Not when they're in love. Sorry to disappoint you. But I'm in love."

"It doesn't disappoint me," I said.

I tried once more. I said, "Steve, I know I'm letting you down. I know I ought to be gay and cheerful, telling you how much fun I'm going to have. I'm still a little squirt at heart. I don't feel a bit gay and cheerful, and I wouldn't have fun for anything!"

He laughed. "I can't say I'd really like to have you singing joyous carols at me. I don't suppose I want you to be too terribly sad, but I most certainly want you to miss me like the very old Nick. You can save the joyous carols till I get back!"

Quiet and sad. Sweet, in a way. But sad sweetness.

And the twenty-four hours were up and he was gone.

He wrote to me every day. I wrote to him two or three times a day, one real letter before I went to bed at night, but during study

hours at school I scribbled little notes behind my text books. And I kept a good supply of envelopes and stamps on hand, ready for mailing.

"I'm doing this when I should be writing an English composition. I've already won my personal part of the war, but I've got to keep it won and not let it go dribbling through my fingers like some other strategic points I could mention. Wasn't there once some very great and brilliant man who loved such a dumb cluck he couldn't even teach her to tell time? And what's more, he kept on loving her all his life. Or her life. I've forgotten who died first."

He had a very good come-back to that.

"Thank God I'm neither great nor brilliant. And thank God I'm such a dumb cluck that I'm very glad you can read and write. What would I live on, if I hadn't your letters? And how could I tick you off when you get fresh, if you couldn't read mine?"

He sent me a miniature service flag, with one star. It was satin and hand-embroidered, very tiny. He wrote, "Paste this over the mirror in your vanity. It's my looks you should be thinking of, not your own."

I did. I pasted it right on and I still have it. I didn't try to keep other people from seeing it either. I was proud of it.

Mother always put our mail on the tray on the hall table. She had turned out to be a surprisingly understanding person. Thoughtful, too. When we were younger, before the war, she chucked it all together on the tray for us to run through. But after Steve went back she always had mine on top, so I wouldn't be in any suspense. And the first thing I did, before I put down my books, was grab my mail and go off upstairs to read it.

After the first week, he made a little arrangement with us, his mother and me. He would call us alternately every evening. If he didn't call, we would know it was because he couldn't. It was to be a secret signal among us. And to the credit of my entire family, during those days, not one of them made a move toward the telephone when

the evening call came in. They waited, smiling, for me to take it so I could hear that exciting "Virginia calling! . . . Here's your party. Seventy-five cents, please." Then the click of coins in the pay box. "Go ahead, please."

And then Steve.

For three weeks everything went along like clockwork, letters, phone calls, everything. Then one afternoon when I went in there was no letter from him on top of the stack. I went through everything, ads, bills, questionnaires, Dorry's letters—nothing from Steve.

"They say the mails are terrible," I said to Mother. "I've had awfully good luck so far, haven't I?"

"You certainly have! Everybody's been complaining! You've had marvelous luck so far!"

"I wish it would keep up," I said. "I don't want it to stop."

"You must be patient, dear. You can't expect all the good luck to come your way."

"Did you call Mrs. Delafield?" I said, with sudden suspicion.

She hesitated briefly. "Yes, I did, Cherry. She didn't hear, either."

"I'm going to give the post office a good piece of my mind," I said. "They've had every cent of my allowance for months, with all those airmails and special deliveries. Dad's absolutely right about the Administration. They can't even run a post office!"

Mother laughed a little too cheerfully.

There was no telephone call that night. We sat there, watching the phone until midnight. There was no call. When I went to bed I tried bravely to remind myself that all over the world and all over the United States, millions of women, mothers and wives and sweethearts, had gone through this before me. But I couldn't identify myself with those millions of mothers and wives and sweethearts. I was just one very lonely person and my heart was broken.

I argued about it with myself. "They loved theirs as much as this! Theirs were as lovable to them as he is to you! They loved them just as much!"

"They did not!" I argued back hotly. "Some of them don't care at all! Some of them are glad they're gone! Look how they act, dancing and laughing and going ahead with their work and their jobs and their lessons . . ."

"What are you going to do? Go out and proclaim it from the housetops?"

So I told myself to shut up and quit arguing about it and I turned over.

I got a letter from him five days later. It was addressed by him, in his handwriting.

"I left this with a friend to mail for me. By the time you receive it, you may be reasonably certain that I have arrived—where I am to arrive. As things look now, unless they change their minds again, I shall be flying over. That is, being ferried over. There's a shipment of 'big babies' and to save space they are filling them up with us and dehydrated eggs—poor eggs in both cases! I'm not mad about flying over. Not because of the danger. It's by far the safest kind of a crossing. But the discomfort. You told me you had ridden on air liners. These are not like those! These have no seats and you sit on the floor. More space-saving. I'm willing to get down on my knees once in a while for important things like saying prayers or proposing, but I'm darned if I like the idea of sitting out the whole Atlantic Ocean. I think I'm going—where I thought I was going. It's all right with me. Thank heaven, I don't need binoculars for my spiritual eyes; nor compasses; nor blueprints. But they come in all right on a mission.

"Cherry, did I forget to tell you that I love you? I'm absent-minded about some of these little niceties, but if my lips neglected to mention it they were playing it very low-down on my heart."

So there was no more doubt about it. I hadn't had any doubt about it anyhow, I had just forced myself to say that there might be a doubt. Now I couldn't even do that.

Mother was right about Mrs. Delafield. She was wonderful. She came over that night, brisk and businesslike, and said she wanted to consult me about her future plans. She wanted to ask my advice.

We all looked surprised. I didn't say anything. Usually my advice, or even my opinion, was the last thing anybody thought of asking for.

Mother had put Steve's picture, the big, military one, up on the piano. She said she was very proud of him and wanted to show him off. I had the smaller one, that I liked better, in my room upstairs.

Mrs. Delafield went over to the piano and looked at it awhile.

Then she looked over at me and smiled. She looked at Mother and shook her head a little. "You never know, Helen, you never know." Then she became brisk and businesslike again. What she had wanted to ask my advice about was what to do with that big house she had bought in Morrisville.

"A good many of our very nice things really belong to Steve," she said. "And it was partly his money that bought the house. Now I can't make up my mind whether to sell it and store the things we want to keep, or to rent it to some reasonably desirable tenant. We can't let it stand idle during this housing shortage."

"Oh, Gorge," Mother said regretfully, "are you going to leave Morrisville? I'm so sorry. I was afraid you would and hoping you wouldn't. But I don't blame you at all."

"I'm not going to leave. I'm just not going to keep up that big house alone when other people can't get rooms! I suppose I could take in roomers, but you can't get any help, and I don't seem at all the type to run a boardinghouse!"

Sad as that night was, we went off into genuine laughter over the idea of her running a boardinghouse. She laughed too. "Better people than I are doing it though," she said defensively.

"But what are you going to do, Gorge?"

"Me? Oh, I've gone to war. I went over to Picatinny this morning and landed myself an essential war job so I have to do something about the house right away."

"Gorge, I think you're wonderful! I'm proud of you."

I was proud of her, too. I was proud that she was going to be my mother-in-law. I couldn't say anything but she smiled and patted my arm. Maybe she saw it in my eyes.

"But what has Cherry got to do with it?" Mother asked.

"Because Steve would want me to do what she wants done. And that's what I want, too. I am not sure they will keep on living here and want that house. But if he should be injured again, or sick, it would make a perfect place for recuperation. Maybe the best thing would be to store the things we treasure and rent it for a while. Do you think so, Cherry?"

I tried to look wise and thoughtful but my head was whirling.

"And I want you to go over a lot of things with me, Cherry. There

are some things I will want to keep myself, as long as I am keeping anything. But there are some that Steve doesn't care much about or know much about—probably doesn't even remember. And yet I think almost any woman would like to have them in her first home. We'll have to take time and wade through them and you can decide for yourself."

We talked about those things until nearly midnight and it was a great relief to all of us. It took our minds away from our frightened wondering and set them to work on practical, sensible, material things. We were very calm by the time she left.

She went to work at Picatinny and she didn't drive her car, either. She took a bus. I told myself I was certainly a very lucky girl! You could hardly expect to get two mothers as good as ours! It seemed to upset the laws of statistics.

Then we were waiting again for letters. We explained repeatedly to each other that it always took a long time for the first letters to come. It had been weeks before we heard from Larry when he first went over. But you couldn't get it out of your mind.

The days crept along through March. I read all the war news in the papers and listened to hours of broadcast but there was never anything that could be traced definitely to Steve. I didn't know whether he was flying alone or had another outfit. I didn't know anything.

Dorry was hearing very regularly from Slim but he was in the Pacific area. We hounded the Red Cross unmercifully but they couldn't get a line on Larry.

March dragged miserably off the calendar and it was April. I came in from school and went up to my room. I tried to write Steve a letter but it was hard to write letters when you didn't know anything—where he was, what he was doing, what outfit he was with. There wasn't anything much to think about, except how nice he was.

I got out the box of his old letters, the ones from Virginia. In such a few weeks, they were old. I knew them by heart. But I went over on the bed and began reading them again.

I heard the telephone ring downstairs but I paid no attention. I didn't bother about the telephone any more; it was only mail I was waiting for. Dad answered and there was a brief murmur of voices

which died away, or I quit listening. I was deep in the stack of old letters.

I heard Mother coming slowly upstairs. I glanced at my door. It was closed. I was glad of that. Then she knocked lightly. "Cherry, may I come in?"

"Yes, of course. I'm not doing anything. Just looking over some old letters."

She closed the door behind her and stood there, looking at me. "Cherry, I have some bad news for you."

I sat up so quickly the letters and pictures scattered off over the floor. "Is he dead?"

"Yes. He is dead. He got his wish, though. He had his chance at Berlin."

"Maybe he was just injured," I said. "Maybe he was taken prisoner—like Larry."

"No. He is dead. He got his plane back but died before they could get him out."

"Isn't there any doubt—at all?"

"No, Cherry. I wish there were."

I got off the bed and began picking up the letters. Mother helped me. "Does Mrs. Delafield feel very badly?"

"Yes, of course. She is a wonderful woman, Cherry. I am proud to be her friend."

I had been proud, too, that she was going to be my mother-in-law. But now she wasn't.

"Dad's gone to bring her over here for a while," Mother said. "They'll be here soon."

We went downstairs when we heard the car pull into the driveway. They were all right. They didn't try to kiss me. I couldn't have stood that. They stood around with their heads up and looked me straight in the face as if they expected me to be all right, too. So I was.

"I can't tell you how grateful I am, Cherry," Mrs. Delafield said. "How grateful I am for everything—for all that happened!"

I did not feel at all grateful. For anything.

"It took us so long to get to know each other—and all my fault. But when we got that wall broken down, it was wonderful. I am

down on my knees in spirit thanking God from the bottom of my heart."

"I am, too," Mother said suddenly, "because Cherry had such a rare and lovely thing happen to her! And when she was so young! Very few young women have such a perfect thing to treasure in their memory."

"You may as well settle down and spend the night, Gorge," Dad said. "Nobody's going to sleep, so we may as well stay awake together."

"I can't!" she said, widening her bright eyes. "I have to catch the Picatinny bus at seven-thirty."

"Are you going tomorrow, Gorge?" Mother asked humbly.

"Of course I'm going! Whose war is this? Certainly I'm going!"

"You're absolutely right, Gorge," Dad said heartily. "You make me think a little more of our civilian population."

"I hope Steve knows about it," I said. "He was a little fed up with us civilians. . . . Mother, when school is out, may I join the WACs or the WAVES . . . and get into the war with Mrs. Delafield?"

"Yes, you most certainly may!" Mother said. "If it's still going on, and you feel the same way, you certainly may!"

"Is it a promise? You won't change your mind when you get over being sorry for me?"

"I won't get over being sorry for you, Cherry," Mother said. "And I won't get over being proud and grateful that you had—just what you had. But it's a promise. Don't you think so, Dad?"

"Absolutely! By all means! If they keep it up long enough I'm going to join something myself!"

## XVI

It was May again. The air was gold and silver, with forsythia thrusting out yellow wands and sunshine splashing the dogwood blossoms. It was a warm Sunday afternoon and we were sitting on the porch. Skivar was beside me on the top step. We were pleasant but quiet. It seemed strange, thinking back, to remember how we used always

to be laughing or chattering about something. There was not much to talk about any more, and hardly anything to laugh at, but we were not sad. Just quiet and pleasant.

A bus screamed up to the corner half a block away and we looked toward it. Only a sailor got off. He adjusted his cap to a rakish angle and started down the street. He walked bow-legged and weaved to and fro on the sidewalk.

"Is that what authors call a "seaman's roll?" I asked idly.

"He must be drunk," Doris said. "If he rolled like that aboard ship he'd roll right overboard."

He began to whistle. "What do we do in the Infantry?" He whistled softly. We could hardly hear it.

"He must be a saboteur in a particularly obvious disguise," I said. "Have we any military objectives lying about?"

Skivar beside me bristled suddenly.

Mother stood up. She started down the steps. You couldn't exactly call it walking, she moved so slowly and so stilly. She stood very straight, slim and straight. She went down the flagstone path toward the forsythia trellis at the end. Skivar went with her. He went slowly, too, with his nose to the ground, sniffing.

For some reason we stood up, Dad and Doris and I. We stood there, saying nothing. It was Mother we were watching. She stood under the trellis, waiting. The whistling stopped. And then we heard it!

"Hi ya, Mother! How are chances for a nice juicy—"

It was Larry!

We were all on our way, and fast, but Mother was there, waiting. We laughed. We cried. We hugged him. Dorry and I jumped up and down and hugged each other. Skivar, barking wildly, ran rings around us, grabbing a foot whenever he could get his teeth on one.

Doors and windows began opening and neighbors came out on their porches. Excited exclamations began to ring out.

"There's Larry Gillespie!"

"Larry! Hi, Larry!"

"That you, Larry? Where the devil did you spring from?"

"Sure, that's Larry. I'd know him anywhere!"

Children began running up and more dogs. Parents came more

sedately but they came. Mother stood there, not saying a word, holding on to Larry as if she could never let go. He held her, too, laughing and crying like the rest of us. It was Thanksgiving and Fourth of July and Old Home Week all rolled into one. The racket must have been terrible but it sounded heavenly.

The neighbors were nice, though. The men shook hands with Larry and the women kissed him and then they called off their dogs and children and went back to their homes and we went up to ours, all five of us squeezing onto the narrow walk as close to Larry as we could get. But Mother was closest.

I noticed right away, because I was looking for it, that back of the laughter and back of the tears, there was grimness in Larry. Like in me.

'We sat down on the steps, with our arms around anybody we could get hold of. There were so many things we wanted to know we couldn't think of the right questions to begin with. We were satisfied to sit there, huddled together, touching him wherever we could reach him.

After a while, looking hard at me, he said, "What's the matter, Squirt? Have you been sick?"

"No, I haven't been sick." I laughed. I was glad I could laugh. We had plenty to laugh about, now that Larry was home again. "I've been in love. That's all. It leaves the same washed-out look as sickness."

He gave me another hard look. I gave him one just as hard. "You needed me here to lick the little panties off you," he said.

"Has the Army run out of clothes, Larry?" Doris broke in. "Or did you decide to switch branches and surprise them?"

"I should have picked the Navy in the first place," he said. "It's better to drown like gentlemen than to get stuck in prison camps."

"Where did you get the uniform, Son?" It was the first word Mother had spoken.

"It was swiped for me and presented for distinguished service or something. They were getting me home by boat and figured I would attract less attention when we landed if I went nautical like the rest of them. I think it's darned becoming, myself. I suppose I've got to report back into service but I made up my mind to snitch a

few hours' leave first. I figure I've got it coming but the War Department and I do not always see eye to eye."

We could hardly wait, once he had started, to hear what had happened. We kept trying to get closer to him and Skivar was between his knees so we were often in danger of a family slide down the steps.

He could not get back to his outfit from Occupied France because they had moved from Sicily over to Anzio. Since three Americans were hard to conceal and they did not want to jeopardize their friends of the underground, they decided to separate and take their chances alone. With considerable help but little to eat, Larry had worked his way south. He was well out of Occupied France by that time but things were no easier.

"It's all occupied and don't let anybody tell you it isn't! They are afraid to call their souls their own. I am not sure they are their own. I know their rations aren't."

He was crawling on his stomach, slowly, when he heard voices speaking in loud and voluble French. He worked his way toward them. It was three French fishermen in filthy woolen shirts and grimy canvas pants. They had thick black beards and long matted hair. They were black with dirt and wind and sunburn. They were cooking fish over a campfire and he had not eaten for three days.

He listened carefully trying to pick up enough to find out whether they were Vichyites or Free French. But they talked fast and gutturally and he couldn't make head or tail of it. But no German words were used and there was no Heiling Hitler and the fish smelled better than ever, so he felt encouraged.

Then, out of a clear sky, in what Larry said was the most heavenly Brooklynese one could dream of, one of them said, "The Bums will win it six ways to Sunday."

Larry said he would have dropped dead except that lying on the ground there was no place to drop. He edged closer. They were back in noisy and profuse French again. French fishermen, he would stake his life on it, black-bearded and dirty! But what the hell did French fishermen know about the Brooklyn Bums? He decided to take a chance.

He flattened himself closer to earth and said, "*Bonjour*," as cockily

as he could in the circumstances. "*Bonjour*, but in my opinion the Bums haven't a chance. The Yanks have it in the bag."

After a moment of dead silence, the fishermen went off into another torrent of French. He couldn't make a word out of it.

"Listen, Brooklyn," he said, "interpret these frogs for me, won't you? *Bonjour* and *merci* is my Alpha and Omega."

"Crawl up to the fire, you damned fool, and keep your big American mouth shut," one said softly. "Do you want to get us all shot?"

"Come flat, and don't show up in the firelight. Be ready to duck for cover. What the hell are you doing here?" asked another voice.

They were American spies. After all those months of being shunted along out of sight, from cellar to attic to hole in the ground, he had run into a bunch of American spies.

"If an owl hoots, dive under the nets and look like a fish. We've got a lookout to warn us—damn good lookout, I must say, not to spot you coming through! The heinies have a post down the coast a few miles. If anyone starts this way, we get the signal. It's an owl today. If it hoots, you dive for the nets."

"You aren't hungry, I suppose?" one of them said.

"Not at all," Larry said. "I've had nothing but what Nazis and other swine thumbed their noses at for three months, and the last three days I've had nothing. But naturally I'm not hungry."

He said the fish was so delicious it would have had Delmonico turning over in his grave for envy. They had black bread and wine, no butter and no cigarettes. Larry smacked his lips, telling us about it.

"Delicious!" he said. "Delectable! Delicious!"

When an owl hooted, Larry dived under the nets. The men laughed. They said one hoot meant their man was coming in; two hoots meant business.

Their lookout had not been so bad, after all. As soon as he got in he asked, in French:

"Where's the Yank?"

Larry crawled out from under the nets. The lookout had not seen him. He had heard him. Larry had crawled over something that hurt and muttered bitterly,

"Damn the damn—"

Both words and accent were pure, unadulterated American. The

lookout did not hail him, because if the Nazis had a wide outpost they would hear any rumpus that might ensue. He could tell from the sounds that Larry was heading for their camp and could hardly miss it. So he let him go.

Larry stayed out of sight, half under the fish nets and in shadow. He said it was a glorious evening. He said heaven would have to offer some right smart inducements to rival that heavenly night under the fish nets. Most of the time they talked in French, loudly. When they spoke to him, they did it in American whispers. Larry said he had never realized what a beautiful language it was, even with whispered profanity generously interspersed.

He noticed that one of the four, though he joined as volubly as the others when the conversation was in French, addressed not one word to him although he watched him constantly with shiny, beady black eyes. Larry got uneasy about it.

"Has he got a beef on about anything?" he asked finally.

The men laughed. "No, he's not beefing. He's our instructor. He's real bona fide French. Pierre his name is. He understands English but doesn't speak it so well."

Pierre grinned broadly.

Larry said it was the oddest setup he ever saw in his life. He would have sworn it was an authentic fishing camp, of a low order. Their equipment was scanty and mean. They were entirely unarmed.

The one they called Jacques said, "Have you got a name or are you a military secret?"

Larry told them his name, rank and former outfit with a brief account of what had happened to him.

"If, by any bad luck, we get caught with you," said the one called André, who seemed to be their leader, "we'll call you Luray. You pretend to be a dumb ox. Keep your mouth open like a fool and your voice shut like a wise man. Don't let out a word in French. Your *Bonjour* wouldn't even fool Intelligence!"

They all laughed. Larry said he had never realized that laughter was such a divine sound. He had never expected to hear it again. He was as curious about them as they were about him, but he said all he got out of them you could put in a mustard seed. They called

themselves André, Pierre, Jacques and Jean. And they stuck to their names. When he asked what branch of service they were in they said they were "detached." When he asked about rank they said they were so rank they stank.

"They told me a few things," he said, "but they never tied anything up with themselves. They said they had been getting ready for 'this job' for twelve years. They had to be hand-picked because of looks and French-trained accent but they had to learn fish-talk in Marseille. They were engineers. They had authentic French papers, had them long before the invasion of France, properly okayed by the Nazis. They said America would be surprised at some of the things that were going on, both over here and over there. But they said if I could keep my big American mouth shut they would yank me out of there."

"Evidently you kept it shut," Doris said.

"Not shut enough, Dorry, not shut enough. But they yanked me out anyhow."

After a while—he said they talked most of the night—the one called André said, "What did you say your name is?"

"Gillespie. Larry Gillespie."

"Are you a right guy?"

"Right enough, I suppose; I've seen righter." Larry said modestly.

"Jacques, wasn't it a Larry Gillespie that fool Del had us falling all over each other trying to get wind of? Larry Gillespie, a right guy."

"By George, you're right, André! So it was. Larry Gillespie. Sometime last year."

"Do you mean the guy they call that 'fool in England'?" Larry asked.

We sat very still, huddled together on the porch steps.

"Larry," Mother said, "it is that 'fool in England' that Cherry is in love with."

Larry didn't say anything for quite a while. "Oh!—Like that, huh?—He must be a right guy himself. They all call him 'that fool' but you can tell by the way they say it they'll give him everything they've got—Cherry, huh?—I never thought of that. The only way I could figure it out was that Dad had the Chamber of Commerce up

and at 'em or that it was one of your petticoated but indomitable clubs, Mother. I never thought of Cherry—but why take it so hard, Cherry?" he asked suddenly. "I must have been in love a dozen times before I was your age but I never went anemic over it. And if he's got the whole Air Force and the RAF and the French underground and our best S S working for him, he ought to be fairly safe, fool or no fool. The darnedest fool that ever lived couldn't give them all the slip."

"Cherry, dear," Mother said, "wouldn't you like to make us some coffee? Larry must be hoarse, talking so much."

"No, I wouldn't like it at all," I said. I laughed again. "You're always the perfect hostess, Mother, but you can't get rid of me because I don't want to miss anything. And besides, I want to tell him myself. It's because he's dead, Larry. He did give them all the slip!—They got him on his last trip over."

"Oh!—Like that!—It's a tough break!"

"And don't you tell me I'm young and will soon get over it!" I warned him. "Nobody else said it. I wouldn't have taken it from them and I won't take it from you!"

"Why should I dish out any baloney like that? Of course you won't get over it. Why should you get over it? None of us is going to get over this!—It's just one of the tough breaks! They are all getting them, women all over the world. I don't know why we feel our American women are so sacred they can't be hurt or so delicate they can't buck up to it like other women all over the world!—But it's a very tough break!"

"All right." My voice was as grim as his. "I'll take that. I know what you mean—now go ahead from where you left off. You're under the fish nets and the spies remember that 'my fool in England' had asked them to look for you. Go on from there."

Early next morning, Pierre, the real Frenchman, went down to the Nazi camp to get a pass to go to town for the night. He said they were in need of supplies and the men were getting restive, needed a change. The Nazis understood that. They had done it several times before so there was no trouble about getting the pass and the Nazis gave him a list of things to bring up for them and some letters to post.

They did not hurry about their preparations because they did not

want to reach the village until nightfall. The first thing they did was dig a fox hole at the edge of their campfire and collect a stack of twigs and small branches beside it, along with a heap of ashes and a bucket of water. That was in case the Nazis sent a guard up to superintend their departure. In that event, Larry was to dive into the fox hole and crouch there while the 'Frenchmen' stamped the fire out over his head and poured water on the ashes. They told him they would try not to crack his skull.

The first few times they had asked for passes to the village a guard had come up for inspection but they had been there so long and had, apparently, followed orders so punctiliously, that all suspicions had been lulled and their last three trips had been uninspected. But they were determined to be on the safe side, prepared for any eventuality.

For the trip down, on the fishing smack, Larry had to be tied up in the tarpaulin with the fish nets and camp equipment. He didn't care. He said he would have considered it a privilege to stow away with Jonah in a whale's belly. When they slung him, as he expressed it, along with the other paraphernalia into the tarpaulin they gave him some grimy shirts to protect his head. While they were rough and ready at tossing him about he noticed they handled their fish nets with a solicitude that was almost tender.

"Are they made of nylon?" he asked. "And I suppose the leads are platinum."

"In our business," Jacques said brusquely, "the first rule and the last rule are identical and brief; keep your mouth shut."

It was not until later that he learned the miniature maps and secret data they had collected were sealed inside those little leads.

Larry said he got something of a jolt when they slung the tarpaulin onto the smack and let it lie where it fell, as if in fact it contained only fish nets and no human bones. It was dusk when they shoved the smack out into the water. Larry begged them to let him stick his head out; he wanted a look at the coast, which he knew bristled with defenses. They wouldn't do it. They said the less he saw, the less he would have to shoot off his mouth about.

"You wouldn't see anything, anyhow," André told him. "It's all concealed and camouflaged."

"We don't know just where the enemy keeps its eyes," André explained. "This is a case of neither seeing nor being seen."

"They said they didn't care about me," Larry said. "They said I was expendable but they weren't."

The village was in a small cove. Larry didn't get a glimpse of it. He listened until his ears hurt but there were very few sounds. The splash of water, the rub of wood on wood; he said it seemed to him like the "sound of deadness." Footsteps echoed hollowly. Finally there were voices, French and German and Italian. Since he heard no sounds of altercation he knew the passes had been accepted without demur. The voices died away with receding footsteps. Dead silence. He lay in the tarpaulin and waited.

After what seemed a couple of eternities, there were footsteps again. Suddenly the tarpaulin, with him in it, began to slide slowly along the deck of the fishing smack. A few bags of things, not very heavy, were thrown on deck and landed somewhere near him with dull thuds. Suddenly, inside the tarpaulin, he felt himself falling briefly and hit the water with a splash.

There were loud, swift exclamations in French; crisp German inquiries, voluble French explanations. All subsided quickly. The tarpaulin, with Larry in it, bobbed in the water and then moved slowly, almost imperceptibly. He had been ordered to take what happened and under no circumstances to make any movement on his own account, so he resisted the temptation to try to slit the bag as Monte Cristo had. The moving stopped. No water was seeping into the tarpaulin so he figured the worst that could happen would be suffocation.

He felt solid bottom beneath him then and knew he had landed somewhere. After an interminable interval, the solid bottom began to move and he and the tarpaulin moved with it.

Presently the lacings of the tarpaulin were loosened and the swathes of soiled shirts were withdrawn. Larry extricated himself from the encircling nets and stuck his head up. He was in an Italian submarine manned by a foreign crew. None of his friends of the French fishing camp was in evidence. Just this foreign crew, mixed French and Italian, he said. They looked at him. He looked at them.

"Everything happens to me," Larry said.

"I told you he couldn't keep his big mouth shut. That's ten bucks you owe me!"

"Jacques, is that you?" Larry asked incredulously.

"That makes it twenty. I told you he'd mention names inside of five minutes."

Then they all laughed. It was an Italian submarine which had not been available to turn over with the fleet when Italy surrendered. The commander, presumably a devoted Fascist, offered to gather a loyal crew and carry on for the cause. He gathered men with a good Fascist or Nazi record but who he knew were secretly on the other side of the fence. But the Germans were willing to work anybody who was willing to work, having no cause for mistrust. On this trip, they were en route to Lisbon under orders both from the Nazis and André.

Only André and Jacques of the fishing group were on board the sub. When Larry asked about the others, André said they had gone back to the camp. He said it was a good spot for them. They were going to say that these two had tired of being stuck alone in the woods and had joined up with another outfit.

Larry said they talked a little more freely when they were once under way. They told him more was going on in the U. S. A. than the U. S. A. had wind of. They said Uncle Sam had copied a few pages from German and Russian text books and had hand-picked men in secret schools tucked away out of sight where they were learning the devilish lessons that had been used on us to such bloody effect.

"Everybody says our Intelligence is no good at all," Doris reminded him.

"That's because you only hear of the flops," Larry said. "Sure there have been flops, plenty of them, and they make headlines. What's down on the other side of the ledger never gets the lime-light."

They told him nothing about themselves, not even their names. And they argued a good deal over what they should properly do with him when they reached home.

"If you had kept your mouth shut, in the first place, we could

have assumed that you were a poor American refugee, stranded over there and hiding out. But for all we know, since you admit Army service, you may be a lousy low-down deserter."

"Larry!" Mother protested indignantly.

"They laughed when they said it," he assured her comfortingly.

On the second night, no one suggested turning in early and Larry noticed they seemed alert and watchful. The sub had emerged, to charge the batteries he supposed, but he had learned not to ask questions. It was not dashing ahead as formerly but seemed to be cruising, almost circling. Suddenly a small boat pulled alongside and the men on the submarine steadied it with their hands while André and Jacques got aboard.

"Come along, easy," André said. Larry followed them. Nobody spoke. The boats swung apart and the oarsmen began pulling. The submarine disappeared.

"Nice work," André said approvingly.

The oarsmen rowed steadily with long strokes and soon Larry, straining his eyes, discerned a shadow ahead of them, a shadow blacker than the night. The boat pulled up to a shadowy black hulk and André put a rope ladder into Larry's hands.

"Up with you," he said. "Take it easy."

Larry went up gingerly. Hands were waiting at the top to help him aboard. André and Jacques followed. Still in Stygian blackness, Larry said he didn't see how they ever did it, the boat was raised to position and the black hulk moved off in the night. Some one took hold of Larry and led him downstairs and into a dark bunkroom, put a life jacket in his hands, shoved him to a bunk and told him to turn in.

"Didn't you see anybody, Son?" Mother gasped.

"Nobody."

"Didn't anybody say anything?"

"Just, 'This is your bunk; turn in.' "

"What a ghastly experience!"

"I've had worse."

"What did you do?"

"Just what they told me. I turned in and went to sleep."

When he got up in the morning they gave him a razor, soap and

the uniform. He knew what to do with them. It was a slick Navy cutter they were on, stripped and geared for speed. And they were speeding. The crew was small but expert. Every man had his job and was hard at it. Three men were working over papers in a corner. Larry wandered around awhile and finally ventured a question.

“What’s become of my friends?”

“Your friends? What friends?”

“The guys I came aboard with.” Larry was being cagey; he was not going to lose any more bets for anyone if he could help it.

“Who are they?”

“Search me,” Larry said. “We just struck up acquaintance at Monte Carlo.”

“You think you are their friend?” He said the man had an odd guttural voice, with some accent.

“Why not?”

“Because you are their prisoner,” he was told. “Hans! Here is your prisoner!”

“Larry, no!” Mother cried in horror.

“No, Mother, they were guying me again. But it sure gave me a jolt. It might have been. After all, I only had their word they were American Intelligence. But they were. Now they looked so American and so official I did not recognize them. They were there all right. New haircuts, beards trimmed down to smart mustaches, André’s verging toward red and Jacques’ plastered with black wax. I told them I was glad to know what they really looked like so if I ran into them again I would recognize them. ‘Oh, no, you won’t, sonny, no you won’t,’ André said. ‘This isn’t how we look either.’ ”

“I don’t see why they couldn’t trust you!” Mother said indignantly. “After all, you had risked your life, too, for the same cause.”

“They trusted my intentions,” Larry said, “but not my talent for dissembling. In fact they told me I was too much of an Israelite for their business.”

“Israelite!” she exclaimed, still affronted.

“Don’t you remember your Bible? ‘An Israelite indeed in whom there is no guile.’ They said I was long on glamour but short on guile.”

That was about all. Late next day, the cutter picked up or was picked up by a convoy and trailed along with them. But at the end they cut off again and came in on their own. They still argued about what to do with Larry. The captain disclaimed all responsibility for him, said he wasn't his prisoner. He had been told to pick up André and party, but they called him Andy on that boat. He had done his chore and Larry's future was none of his business.

They decided at last, circumstances being as they were, and since they were obliged to make immediate report to Washington without delay or interference, they would not take time to turn him over to the MP. They would land him along with the crew and let him announce his arrival himself. But they warned him not to waste time doing it as they would have to include him in their report.

Their own activities being so important and so secret, and their papers in perfect condition, André cleared the whole crew and Larry landed with them without question. They gave him money to come home on.

"You'd better report to somebody right away, Son," Mother said uneasily.

"I suppose so. But I'm going to do it by wire. I'm not going to give anybody a chance to tell me to take the next plane to Washington."

He worked out the telegram and we went into the living room and stood around him while he called Western Union. It was so good and so unbelievable to have him there, right in the room with us, that we interrupted everything long enough to hug him again.

He sent the telegram to the office of the Adjutant General in Washington. It sounded very military, crisp and brusque and grim. He gave his name, rank, former outfit, a terse résumé of what had happened to him and his present address; said he was reporting for duty and would await orders.

Inside of thirty minutes, the telephone rang. I answered it.

"May I speak to Lieutenant Gillespie?"

"There isn't any Lieutenant—Oh, you mean Larry! Yes! I'll call him."

We stood around, smiling, thinking it was someone who loved us

wanting to welcome him home. But the smiles disappeared with Larry's first two words.

"Yes, sir. . . . Yes, Sir. . . . That's right, Sir. . . . I haven't any uniforms. . . . Yes, Sir. . . . Yes, I understand. . . . Thank you very much, Sir."

He grinned around at us. "They'll have somebody here bright and early tomorrow morning," he announced dryly.

"Not—Military Police!" Mother gasped.

"Oh, no. Just someone to begin giving orders. In the meantime, I am not to see anyone but you. I am to keep on keeping my big American mouth shut. If any newspapermen show up we are to give them rat poison—or words to that effect."

"What did you thank him for?" Mother asked resentfully.

"He congratulated me," Larry said. "He said if there was anything he could do for me to be sure and let him know. He is a full colonel."

I do not know what time we went to bed. It was hours and hours later. And then, still later, Larry was in my room beside my bed. Skivar was with him. Skivar hadn't been six inches away from him since he got home and anyone who wanted to kiss Larry had almost to throttle the big brute at the same time.

"Shove over, Squirt," Larry said. "Up to your old tricks, huh? Trying to hog more than your share of everything, taking up the whole bed!"

I moved over and he lay down beside me. Skivar got on the bed, too. I was used to that. He did it every time he could worm his way into my room without getting caught. A few nights, when I was very lonely, I had opened the door for him myself.

"Don't let anybody tell you things will soon be the same, Cherry," Larry said. "They never will be the same. They may be better. God knows they ought to be better, after all this! But never the same. Not for us. Maybe not for anybody. But that's not saying we can't take it."

"I know," I said. "Steve told me."

I was very glad Larry had come into my room that night, as he had done years before when I had been particularly fresh and spoiled some of his choice plans and he had been pretty rough with me. He

didn't apologize but I knew he came by way of saying he hadn't meant to hurt my feelings. But this time he hadn't said anything to hurt my feelings; he just came.

I knew that Doris and Mother, yes, and Dad, too, would have been thrilled to heaven to have had him go and lie beside them that night, with his arm around them. I was thrilled, too. It took the loneliness out of my room.

We did not talk but we went to sleep, the three of us there together.

I heard Mother turn the knob of my door, almost noiselessly, the next morning. Larry and Skivar did not move. I did not open my eyes.

Mother stood there a while, making no sound at all, looking in. Then she closed the door and went downstairs.











